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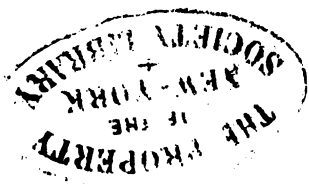
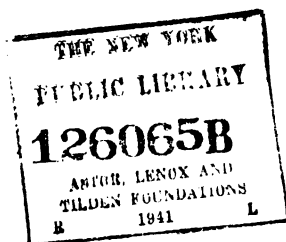
THE SINNER AND THE PROBLEM

BY
ERIC PARKER

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CHAPTER I

THE sun was almost down to the tree-tops before I, who had wandered searching half the morning, found my flowers and my brick wall to work at. For (and may some god defend me for a poor painter) I cannot work as others, good souls, are able; needing first a proper mood to catch hints and tints, and a subject befitting my mood, and the sun on all, and I know not what else beside. But just as the big thrushes in the elms were beginning their evening anthem I turned in my walk, and the scent of cowslips came down wind to me from the meadow, and the old walls were dark against a yellow sky. Send me twice a month a sight like that!

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Some, truly, can chop sticks from any wood to boil their pot, but not I. Believe me lazy, but I needed that hint of cowslips, and began straightway aworking the scent of them into my sky, if you will take my meaning. There were bluebells and anemones for a goddess's bride-bed at my feet, and, just seen, the turret-end of the house, where the chestnuts broke away beyond and left a clean background of thin chromes and greens ; and I had set up my folding-stool under a laburnum-tree that rained gold in the breeze, though that was not yet chill, for it was a full hour to sundown.

Mine host had bidden me to his house an invalid ; or almost that, though I was on the high road to recovery, thanks to his wife's good fare and the winds that blow. What had ailed me I know not with certainty. Heaven forbid that I should add my cackle to the verdict of those doctors ; truly they pulled out a string of unmannerly names from their pockets as monks count their rosaries, and found symptoms in me enough, I once thought, to have laid low an army. *Fly! Fresh air!* whispered I ; and *I will!* I roared back to myself, and left the doctors to squabble unpaid till I could paint a picture and help them. Mine host had promised

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me flowers and leaves and lawns here, there, and everywhere, to tempt brush and paper ; and here I had found a picture well to my liking under my laburnum-tree.

These, then, I needed,—good fare and the winds that blow. And I was like to find both, it seemed ; for we lay on the rib of a hill, and over the back came the breath of the sea, wet and salt many a mile inland, purring through the trees ; so that I, a layman who could make neither head nor tail of doctors' jargon (nor swallow their physic for that matter), opened my lungs into the air and shouted when I reached the hill-top. That was cure enough, I should fancy, for any sick man ; and beside all this, mine host had chosen the place for his school-boys, and in affairs of climate and health I know (for he told me) that parents are particular beings. Good fare, too, there was to be had in abundance, home-brews and white bread rolls and cream in side-dishes, big rounds of beef and apple-pies. I found my pipe a friend again, too, and that rejoiced me not a little, for I know no better weather-glass, so to speak, than a man's pipe : if it is ever cajoling and tempting him, he may slap his thigh and thank the powers ; but if he forget the taste, or it lies

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sulking in his pocket, why then he had best shift his lodging or his doctor.

Below me in the valley stretched woodland country ; oak and ash and elm as I could tell by the colouring, for the ash had hardly budded and the oaks were new-leaved, crimson and russet. A lake, too, lay there, fed (I fancied) by a stream or two from the hills, and another streak of water ran a gold riband out to the river and the ships ; this also, it seemed to me, joined the lake, but so thick were the trees that one might pardon a mistake. I could see a tiny hamlet nestling under a spire, and near the lake, that mirrored bronze leaves and yellow sky, a red-brick house, square-built and solid.

But I was neither up the hill nor down, for we stood half-way on the slope, and the path I had trodden lay along it, and I had but noticed the red-brick house on my left beneath me, as a poor painter with doctors' bills in his pocket may glance at the dwellings of the rich, and sigh, knowing they are not for him and the likes of him. For me, just then, I was making the most of my light, and my painting promised well, as I thought ; and I plied my brush happily, thanking heaven that there was time enough and to spare for a round dozen of

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pictures before I must back to the smoke and rattle of the town. And there were intervals in the thrushes' singing when I thought I could hear the first few uncertain notes of the nightingale, before his love is on him and willy-nilly he must sing, a long-drawn whistle, keen and thrilling, and then a jerk and a fal-la-la, as if he caught himself in song before the time ; but I listened for him, because I love the nightingale above all singing things, and he sent me mad once before on a hot night in May,—it must be ten years since.

So my painting grew till the light had nearly gone ; already the lake and the woods had dulled, and only on the hills the sun shone. Then I heard steps behind me, steps as of two, treading softly on the grass and the flowers. They paused at my back, and I did not look round, for a painter must make more of his time than need a—curate, I meant to write, and let that stand ; but the colour was wet then, and I was busy with a half-light in the chestnuts.

"That's very pretty," spoke a voice at my elbow.

I finished for the day and turned on my camp-stool. Two boys stood by me, their

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hands in their pockets, and it seemed my picture had attracted them. One of them, the younger (as I guessed), looked at me and repeated the compliment. Now my pictures (praise Hooker!) have found favour before, and disfavour too, for what that be worth; but I like an honest criticism, and this came of conviction. He looked curiously at my paint-box, and picked up a fallen brush, handing it me with respect, which pleased me mightily; I cannot tell why, unless that, as a rule, I am left to gather my brushes myself. I told him that I felt honoured by his approval, and I asked what the other thought; but he did not answer directly.

“He likes it because it’s green and red and yellow,” said he at last. “He paints like that himself, in the papers.” He threw himself down in the grass, and kicked his toes into the ground one after another, regardless of the bluebells. “Now I like a picture where you can see everything in it,—little frogs and things in front, I mean; and something happening,—a fight, or a house on fire.”

Lack-a-daisy, thought I, but this is a Philistine; and I declare I nearly launched at him the greater part of my views on Impressionism

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and other kindred matters, which would have puzzled him sorely, I should think, as mayhap they have puzzled others. Howbeit, I considered, such things are not for children to quack over, after all, and asked him another question. "So he paints?" said I, nodding at his playmate.

"Oh, he does everything, paints, and draws, and carves people's names,—that isn't allowed, at least not on the desks; but he doesn't care, he says. He's always in some row with the masters; he tells lies and cribs and that sort of thing," he added, not, I could see, without a certain admiration. "I should think he was breeched once a week. When were you breeched last?" he asked, turning his head to glance at the figure that stood by my side listening till the tale of his enormities should be told. I guessed the outlandish word indicative of a beating.

"Monday," came the answer meditatively, but he blushed and looked away; I was a stranger then. This day, be it said, was Wednesday.

"You're a regular sinner, it seems," said I. And on my soul, as I caught his eyes, I could not help laughing, till the other stared at me

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from the grass in wonder. But the Sinner he remained, because of that, till the end of the chapter.

"Draw me," he said.

The impertinence of the small being ! Here was I, a stranger in the land, not having set eyes on him to my knowledge before, the sun a flaming half-circle on the hills, and I must needs unpack my pencils for him,—him, breeched once a week ! Yet he seemed confident enough, and presently out came my book, and I drew him where he stood. And as I drew, I hummed under my breath the lilt of a tiny French song that comes to me sometimes when I am amused beyond my ordinary habit ; for a painter must laugh to live, or the Hanging Committee might kill him with so little as a bad light for his picture. When I had nearly finished, and the sun showed only a rim of fire, I found that the other boy was whistling my little song. He had not moved from the grass, and two holes by a clump of primroses showed the dints of small iron-shod boots.

"Had you heard that before ?" I asked.

"That, your tune ? No," he answered simply ; "I like it, though."

The Sinner came round behind me to look.

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"He's always whistling. The music-master says——" He lost his thread as he caught sight of the drawing.

Truth to tell, that did not make a bad picture. When I have looked at it since, I have heard nightingales and smelt cowslips; but others, I know, have seen little else but a twelve-year old boy with frayed knickerbockers, a tip-tilted nose, and a cap on the back of his head. Yet one old man looked at it twice, and drew a clump of primroses in the corner of the page; and as he was old, and met my meaning half-way, so to speak, I left it there. To be sure, since the primrose-clump, some have hinted at a child listening to spring-birds; but he knew it all from the beginning. He was not a critic, let it be said.

Of the other I began a picture, too, lying with his chin on his hands, but I had not more than outlined him in charcoal before a distant bell gave tongue at the school, and the pair of them looked at each other.

"Can we come and watch you paint every day?" questioned the Sinner.

Now I am a selfish, solitary person, and particularly dislike a companion when I am sketching. I cannot tell why, but the know-

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ledge that he (or she) could speak to me, even though I know him by nature taciturn, shrivels me into a mere bundle of nerves, and I cannot put brush to paper without a half-turn of the head to make certain of his silence. Such companions I have had in my time, of course ; and always I have worked abominably till they were tired of watching, or perhaps tired of me. Street Arabs I can tolerate, and reckon their chatter little more than a dog's bark, and it may be I had thought of those when the Sinner made his request ; also, I hardly expected him to come.

The other boy stood shaking himself, and humming my song. He was older, as I guessed, than the Sinner, and might have been thirteen. A big mouth, indefinite nose, and greenish eyes, —so much I noticed in the twilight then, and never was able to catch the same impression of him afterwards. And this is a curious matter ; for an early impression (with me at least,—I know not how other folk may find it) becomes so overlaid with after-thoughts and after-circumstances, that I have sometimes wondered whether in truth I saw and heard aright on first meeting, or whether I cosseted and developed my own fancies and rhythms into face or voice,

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gradually to eliminate and destroy them later.
It may be so.

“I shall call you the Problem,” said I to him,
for he had not once glanced at my charcoal
outline.

CHAPTER II

MINE host's custom was to dine after sundown, whenever that might be. There is more in that notion than might appear ; for there are not a few of my friends whom I am unable to gratify with my company, in summer weather at least, knowing that I must up and away into the house at half-past seven or go fasting to bed. That is an ungrateful custom truly, to draw blinds and light you a lamp when the sun is still warm and the world alive beyond the windows. For the light is the life to such as I am, and I will not sit by tallow and spermaceti when shutters are all that are between me and the sunshine.

But I was to speak of mine host. Whether because of the hard work he made in the daytime, or in obedience to habit and the click of his good lady's needles, he slept soundly after dining, and filled the house with the echoes of

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his sleeping. This I did not discover at first, until (I think on the third evening), after monstrous attempts at vigilance, he broke off a pronouncement on politics with a profound snore, and I turned to my book. On the following morning he wished, as I fancied, to beg my pardon, but of course I would none of that, and told him it had been my own intention to retire early, but that I feared to show him discourtesy, which appeared to relieve his mind to an immense extent, though he can have had little opinion of my resolution afterwards, good soul, if he ever thought more about the matter. But presently he proposed that, if I liked the notion, I should spend an evening or so with his assistants, who, he thought, might amuse me. And I, willing to leave him in peace to dream after his dinner, proposed in reply that I should throw in my lot with these younger men after sundown, pleading irregularity in my times of going out and coming in (I might wish to catch an evening effect a score of miles away, and so on and so on), and thinking in this way the less to disturb his comfort. The upshot was that he agreed with me, as indeed I knew he must; and that same evening I was to visit the men in their own part of the house.

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I had seen these two in the distance often, and had shaken hands with both, but as yet I had had little speech with them. One I guessed at forty or thereabouts; clean-shaven he was, except for a small growth of hair by his ears, which gave him to my mind the idea of a confidential family servant. Also he rapped out an unmusical voice with something of a twang on certain syllables,—hardly an accent you could call it, but I had seen the other man shift uneasily on his chair once or twice when he was speaking. Him I named the Chief Butler, and as for the other, so little I made of him at our first meeting that insensibly he became the Other Man, without any more ado about it.

But besides these few impressions as to their characters I had little else to go upon, for I was busy now with a pair of sketches, one from my laburnum-tree and another sunny study of the place, taking a somewhat nearer view; so that I had seen nothing, it might be said, of the general household, except the two young scamps who found me out on my first day at the school.

It seemed that mine host's school-boys were allowed to do much as they chose in play-hours,

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and as the Sinner was pleased to constitute himself a critic of^l my performances, the Problem followed him ; though beyond a desire to accompany the Sinner, I fancy he would not have cared greatly in what part of the grounds he spent his spare time, so long as he were allowed to ruminate undisturbed when he came there. He lay upon the grass, as a rule, in his favourite position with his chin on his hands, never speaking unless in answer to a question ; and the Sinner stood motionless behind me, watching.

“To whom does the red-brick house in the valley belong ?” I asked the Problem.

He looked at me keenly. “The one by the lake ?” he asked.

“Yes,” said I.

“Red-brick ?”

“Of course.”

“Go on,” said the Sinner.

“Well, it belongs to a lady.”

“An old lady ?” I asked.

“Not what you would call exactly old. No, not very old ; I think she’s twenty-one,” said the Problem. Good heavens, I thought, and what, then, was I ?

“They had a feast because she was twenty-

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one,—that's how he knows," interrupted the Sinner.

"Tell me more about her," I demanded ; but just then the bell rang and the pair of them took to their heels, leaving the question unanswered. I wondered more than once after that if I had not already seen her walking by the waterside ; and because I had no answer to what I asked, I fell to meditating on the necessities of a scholastic life, when the long summer days must be chopped into hours and half-hours to regulate work and play. Little would that suit a man of moods like myself, nor to leave my bed by candlelight for that matter. Then suddenly an impulse seized me to stand for a time beneath the school-room windows and fancy myself a boy again, with an Algebra never to be found when wanted, and a dog's-eared Cæsar's Commentaries. I could hear the Chief Butler in fine fettle, if I am a judge of a school-master's temper. In truth, I listened to the man as one listens to one's own tongue, hearing it for the first time after a month in a French village.

"Will you look at the board, boy, and not sit there telling me that a multiplied by b comes to $a + b$?"

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Wretched man that I am, but I wondered what in the world was on the board !

“You sit there, making those stupid idiotic remarks, with that stupid idiotic grin, and you don’t take the slightest trouble to think out the simplest things—the simplest things that any baby could tell you without thinking for a moment. Do think. You thought it was $a + b$? You’ve no business to think. Will you just try for one minute— ab , very well. Ab , ab ; now then, what does a multiplied by b come to?—What? Wait after school.”

Inevitable ending ! As I left that window, one thought rose insistent ; verily, I would not be a school-boy !

I wandered to another room and at first heard nothing, and then the voice of the Other Man. And as I left him, may the Academy hang me, but for worlds I would not have been a school-master !

I took occasion in the evening to question the Chief Butler on his calling. He had asked me much of my own past life, and somewhat piqued me, perhaps, for I have no school or college career to boast of. Little learning I possess, indeed, compared with the knowledge of these men with liberal educations, for I ran

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away from home at fifteen, and found my way to Glasgow, where I was potboy in an inn to tell the truth, and saved and scraped enough there to get me to Paris. True, there was one piece of book-learning for which I had an affection, the writings of the Latin poets ; and I have always had a certain aptitude in making Latin verses. I used to amuse myself in the evenings—strange employment for a Glasgow potboy!—in turning my thoughts or reading into lyrics and elegiacs and so forth, and once was soundly cuffed by the barman, who accused me of aspiring to education at the University. Well I remember his puzzled face as he glanced over what I had written,—Greek to him, forsooth ! But he lit his pipe with my ode to Lalage. Indeed, I never had a home, as the word is generally understood ; only an uncle who paid my schooling, and thanked his stars, I fancy, when I left him. But not all this did I tell to the Chief Butler, though the Other Man and I came into confidence later, as I shall have to show.

“I commenced brushing at twenty-one,” gave out the Chief Butler, and the Other Man shuddered. “I suppose that I know now pretty well all there is to be known about teaching

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mathematics to small boys. Twenty years is a long time, a very long time."

He would make this remark in a reflective tone, and the Other Man, who knew better than I what might be coming, twice prevented the continuance of his speech with a proffered whisky-bottle, which the Chief Butler refused. I did not understand this at the time, but learned afterwards that he had forsworn such luxuries. Still, I wanted to know the Chief Butler's ideas on the larger issues of life, and drew him to speak of them.

"Soon," he said, "I shall have saved enough to start a little place of my own." And he would go on to sketch his plans, which truly showed forethought enough for a Minister's Budget. He spoke drily and exactly, calculating for our benefit the smallest and most trivial expenses, laying out a hundred here and saving fifty there with admirable certainty and precision.

"You will need a wife to help you," I said once, for I found just then a curious fascination in listening to the monotonous voice figuring twenty years in advance.

At the word *wife* he looked at me. "Yes, I shall be married then," said he, and became reflective. The Other Man told me that before

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it had been suggested I should spend my evenings with these two, the Chief Butler used his time in filling sheets of paper with estimates and sums in addition. There was a large book bound in black leather which lay solitary in a locked drawer. In it, I was told, were copied out on the left-hand pages, concise accounts of the probable expenditure of each year of this school-in-the-air, driven down to pence in places and everywhere in the exactest method. He had worked at it for years, it seemed, and indeed the only literature to be seen in the room was concerned with what might help him, —year-books of public schools, store-lists, agents' circulars bound in cloth, works on architecture and surveying, and I know not what else beside. At the end of each year's account, near the bottom of the page, was an estimated surplus, with notes as to its value if invested in safe but paying securities; there were calculations also of the amount he would leave behind him, given that he died in such and such a year, and pages at the end of the book wherein he laid out at length imaginary wills and bequests, among which the Other Man had set eyes on the words *To my Wife*. The right-hand pages he had left blank, to chronicle there as

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the actual years went round his real expenditure. He was to retire at seventy, and his washing-bills were modest. Although, however, he would speak of the object of his life with freedom, yet this book he had shown to none ; but once the Other Man, returning from a visit before he was expected, found his companion out and the book lying upon the table. He opened it, little thinking of the possibilities it contained, and not at first realising its meaning ; and he asserted to me (there may be truth in this) that the Chief Butler would have shown the book to either of us, but for one thing,—he had taken into consideration the expenses of a family.

The mathematics of the matter were rehearsed to me, then, as a novice in such things. To the Other Man, of course, it was ancient history, and he would do his best to change the subject, the difficulty of doing so serving but to spur him to fresh endeavour. He had discovered, he told me (and indeed I have seen him succeed), an infallible method. He would stand before the fireplace and hold forth himself on any theme that took his fancy : he would make speeches for a lawyer, a condemned criminal, a politician, would recite, parody,

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invent ; but always, nearly, with the same effect, the silence of the Chief Butler. He might, had he chosen, have left the man to add and subtract alone ; but I fancy he took a certain pleasure in routing the enemy, and would steel himself to listen to the ledgers of the fourth year, for instance, until he found an opportunity of breaking in with a flood of eloquence to crush his opponent. It was a kind of duel, and he took delight in calling his man out as often as might be. For the Other Man, as I could well understand, was of a nature entirely different. His room was littered with papers and books ; of a careless habit, he seldom replaced the last he read in the place it came from, and a motley crew it was that strewed his table. Yet a certain air of comfort, born of deep arm-chairs and stray tobacco-jars, surrounded his belongings ; and withal a curious sadness was about the man, which I never fathomed then, though I noticed that he seldom spoke to the school-boys, or, if he did, he spoke gravely and in contrast to the reedy laughter of the elder master, who joked with difficulty but often, insisting on his points. At all events, the younger man enjoyed not half the other's popularity.

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But I was anxious to repeat to these the question I had earlier asked the Sinner and the Problem, small scoundrels who fled at the sound of a bell. "Whose is the red-brick house in the valley?" I asked.

"It belongs to one of the county families," answered the Chief Butler. "The old landlord was a great traveller, and spent most of his time on the Continent. At present of course——"

"Are you thinking of sketching the lake?" asked the Other Man.

"It was the old man who added the left wing," the Chief Butler went on. "I saw the estimates at the time; in fact, I think I may say that if I——"

"You had better get one of your small friends to take you there," interrupted the Other Man. "They're allowed a free run of the place, I believe,—some relations of hers. And the woods are worth a visit."

"Relations of hers,—of whose?" I asked.

There was a pause, and the Chief Butler spoke. "When the old man died, he left a daughter, quite young. And now——"

"She walks in beauty, like the night," interposed the Other Man. "My friend here——"

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but there, he is wondering if I have quoted anything."

There was no doubt he was, and he changed the subject to one which afforded him surer ground for argument,—that of school-catering. The Other Man, I could see, was waiting his time,—he allowed his antagonist to take the field first ; and I in turn waited for him, idly wondering what combination of circumstances had brought the men together. For the Other Man remained an enigma. I could see that he found no pleasure in the routine of his duties ; he never intended, as I knew, to set the goal of headmastership before him, nor, so far as I saw then, had he any object to aim at whatsoever. Indeed, he had told me in so many words that, though he disliked this, he had no wish to adopt any other profession ; but he went through his necessary duties in a matter-of-fact spirit, without ever grumbling, as did his companion, at petty annoyances and trivial hardships. He had a fine taste in literature, as I soon discovered, and was better read than I in many of the standard French writers ; he had some notion of German too, but in that I could not test him. I understood that his career at Oxford had not, from his tutor's point of view,

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been all that it might have been. He had obtained an Honour degree, but his reading had been too cosmopolitan for the liking of the examiners, and he had attempted to translate at sight much which had occupied others two years in the understanding. He had not, it seemed, adhered to any set course of study, but rather had pleased himself as to which books should lie on his shelves and which on the bookseller's. And not only in his reading had he offended the authorities. To his mind they had attempted to exercise over him a control and supervision little short of ridiculous, considering (as he would say) that he might not perhaps have come to Oxford a Solomon, but was not minded to leave it a school-boy. Against the dons of his college he bore a resentment, none the less deep-seated because he seldom spoke of it without laughter. He seemed to have looked for sympathy in his own pursuits, and to have been met with no more than an inquiry as to matters of the towing-path, to have wished to discuss religious subjects with his tutor, and to have been stopped short with questions on his absence from chapel ; and eventually his interviews with those set over him were confined to formal visits made necessary by notes delivered

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to him by the porter. He had been wont to dine in his lodgings, and to dress for a solitary dinner. For he was something of a *gourmet*, perhaps, and something of a dandy. I never saw him when he was not faultlessly dressed,—a matter which interested me, for there were few to notice it—and on the subject of undergraduates' dinners he was an authority. His opportunity of retaliation came, at the present juncture, when the Chief Butler had wandered rather farther afield than usual.

“At the 'Varsity”—I disliked this word, but certainly the other is a most unmanageable length for a man with no time to waste—“At the 'Varsity,” said the Chief Butler, “they must have made a lot out of hall-dinners. Look at the figures of the business. Take a hundred-and-twenty-five men, round numbers, and make your charge for dinner two shillings. Say that twenty have taken their names off hall at the buttery, and fine them sixpence a head for doing so; there's ten shillings clear profit. Say that five more have taken their names off in the same way, and have changed their minds and dined in college after all; charge them for their dinners, and fine them for changing their minds,—there's another half-crown. Then the others

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pay you £10 a night,—£10 12s. 6d. altogether—roughly speaking £75 a week. Now that sum, taking into consideration the kind of dinner provided——”

But the Other Man saw his opening and was off in pursuit of a *gourmet* who penned a weekly article on eating for an evening paper. “Your soup,” he declaimed with a marvellous play of countenance, “your soup, if indeed your appetite be Gargantuan, will steam before you, redolent of nothing in particular. So you be in an empiric mood, you will taste it, and ponder on the philosophy of Heraclitus. ‘All is fire’—was not that it?—and this is a study in black and white, a symphony in pepper. Linger, that you lose not casual suggestion of cat—your waiter rescues you—and welcome an *entrée*. Fish after soup? That were a Rabelaisian excess. No, your *entrée* claims precedence, and presto, look, a whisk of pewter covers, and you have your choice, courtly *croquette* of unassuming sheep, or *réchauffé* of once clucking roost-champion. At such a crisis pause! The true artist’s soul is stirred to its depths; a mistake, and Æsculapius will be your creditor. You hesitate? You are saved. There’s quantity in those *croquettes*; turn rather to thick-rumped roysterer

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of the barn-yard, coy in traditional cloak of white sauce and grated beet. 'Tis a meal for an antiquarian—help your neighbour freely. And now——”

The Chief Butler, who was a good churchman, half rose, thinking the end near. But the Other Man, noticing the movement with the tail of his eye, waved a hand to deprecate interruption.

“And now, what consummation would you suggest? Heaven forbid an anti-climax! A serious matter, this; do you accept the responsibility? Well, then, you must choose between Norwegian blackcock, racy of peat, paint-pot, or what may be, and delicately scalded leg of mutton, to which the willing caper adds appropriate zest. Come, up with the dice! for there is a glint of tinned apricots refusing to be ignored. Without fear banish your black-game, cut your capers, and consider a sweet. Consider it, no more; and the end is really at hand. To dine wisely in hall, is not that to dine well at the Mitre afterwards?”

The Chief Butler sat perfectly silent. Presently he drew out his watch, wound it carefully, and went to bed. I too was silent for a short time; and then I asked the Other Man a question. “If you can talk like that—but why

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do you speak of the impossibility of entering any profession but this, for which you are not fitted, and which you hate?"

He did not reply immediately. "Does the prophet always desire honour—in his own country?" he asked slowly.

I did not understand the answer to that till some time later; but the puzzle he set me to guess was not the only result of that night's conversation, for I think it was on that evening that in consequence of my questions there first existed for me a Lady of the Lake. In any case, thought I, at the lake-side there was a chance of lining my pocket, for the colour of the trees in the water had caught my fancy, and once, I thought, I had seen the Lady of the Lake guiding her punt among the swans.

CHAPTER III

Now, because of the answers I had had from all I questioned on the subject of the red-brick house in the valley, I was occupied with an inextinguishable desire to walk by the lake myself, and perhaps gain a nearer sight of its Lady than was possible from under my laburnum-tree. The house was distant maybe half-a-mile or so, in the lap of gently sloping hay-fields and hills where daffodils bloomed in April. But now the hedges were white with the fire of the may, and cuckoos called up from the lake and woodpeckers whistled, till I tuned them to a song bidding me down and look about me. And the larks were gone wild in the sky, and the wind that blew from the west was clean with the smell of rain and earth and primroses, and the sun shone in the lake and made it a mirror for me, and the life of the big world ran riot in my blood, as it must in the blood of all

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men in the month of May. In the night, too, when the woods were dark and dewy and the moon above all, I could hear the nightingales singing. Just a twitter and a twitter,—then a keening note, long-drawn and pure and sorrowful, and then a throbbing passion of singing that shook and thrilled up the hill to me, and I could not sleep for the mere joy of it all.

And once, when I had listened far into the night, the song of the nightingale was still in me the next morning as I painted,—aye, and for long after, till June and July had gone in a flame of roses, and an August sun lay heavy on the woods, while the birds sat quiet and small, their spring-anthems over and done with, and for some the days drawing on for journeying and travel.

“Sinner,” said I, “I want to see the Lady of the Lake.” He did not understand, as I might have known, for I spoke out what I was thinking, and he knew little of that. “I want to paint the lake in the valley, where the red-brick house is, and to do that I must have permission.”

“Oh, I’ll take you,” said he. “I know her; she’s my aunt’s cousin, and we go there sometimes; we haven’t been since you came.”

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The Problem looked up. "He gets butterflies and things," he said. "I've been with him."

"We could go this afternoon. Would you like to?" asked the Sinner.

"Of course," I said. "It may not be fine to-morrow." Now the sky was cloudless, and the glass as high as I have seen it, and as a fact, it was fair weather for a month to follow; but there, who could know that?

The boys were off to beg leave of absence. This, I learnt afterwards, took the form of a direct petition from myself; thus are we misconstrued. "We knew we should be allowed to go, if we said that," explained the Sinner later. "You meant it, too, didn't you? Or was it only to amuse us?"

"He wanted to draw the lake," said the Problem. "He told you so;" which the Sinner took as a very good reason.

"I wonder if you'll fall in love with her," went on the Sinner. "Every one does, you know."

"Who is every one?"

"Oh, my aunt says every one does. At least, she said that once; and another time she said it was scandalous, and that she tried to

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make people fall in love with her,—every one, even if she didn't like them."

"Your aunt tried?"

The Sinner looked up at me surprised. "Oh no," he said seriously. "I shouldn't think any one could love my aunt; she's too thin, I should think."

"And she wears black cotton gloves," said the other, "and spectacles, and she has black hair,—at least, a little—and elastic-side boots, and a red point to her nose, and she always carries an umbrella and goloshes." When the Problem laid himself out to criticise an acquaintance he was certainly frank; but he made you see with his eyes, so to speak. It was not the kind of criticism I had learnt to expect from the Chief Butler, for instance; whenever that man set epithet to man or woman, I found myself instinctively defending and suggesting, and must pick out possibly good points for a contrast. He had a curious trick of provoking opposition, and often enough I knew nothing of those he might be abusing, but they were my friends so soon as he spoke of them.

"But you, how did you hear all this about your aunt's cousin?" I asked.

"She didn't mean me to hear," he said

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reflectively. "I was under the sofa, you see."

"Under the sofa?"

"Yes. I had a ferret, you know, and I thought perhaps it would find rats and things if I took it round the house; and in the drawing-room the string got caught on the sofa-leg, so I had to go under it to undo the string; and then my aunt came into the room with a lady, and they talked a long time, and I had to keep still."

"And the ferret?"

"Well, that was how it was. It came out, because I couldn't catch it in time, and I saw it put up its nose to look at my aunt, and then she screamed and jumped off the sofa, and so they knew it was me, after that."

"You deserved a beating that time, Sinner."

"Of course I wasn't very big, then," he answered. "Now I just run away, you know. But she didn't say much at the time, only I had to go to bed. I had to say I was sorry afterwards, too. If I had thought, it would have been better to have said so when she came up to my room; but, you see, she took my ferret away, so I wasn't."

I pondered a little on this dire relative of the

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Sinner. A week or so after this I met her, and changed my opinion of her somewhat ; but I found that I could have drawn a portrait of her from the Problem's description.

We were walking along the edge of a nut-copse, and I was about to ask some further question on the subject of this Gorgon of an aunt, when both boys darted from my side in pursuit of a small butterfly. The Problem, after various wild sweeps with his net, to the imminent peril of my hat, in which the insect appeared to find a peculiar attraction, at last caught it, and flung himself down on the grass, net and all, to examine.

"It's a Green Hairstreak," he reported. The Sinner gave a short cry of delight, and I stood watching the two, their heads close together, engaged in placing the creature in an infernal-looking bottle. They gazed at it with the utmost affection and joy as it fluttered wildly under the cork, laid its little brown wings together, and presently was quite still, the moon-green on its under-wings gleaming through the glass. I reflected on the strange mixture of instincts stretched on the ground before me,—small bodies alert with life and happiness and love for their fellow-creatures,

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who yet could look with the greatest interest on the dying struggles of a little insect, rejoicing in the certainty of power and possession. But the tiny bright wings soon lay in a cork-lined box for a coffin, and a pin fastened them motionless ; while the common white butterflies danced by over the hill and up again into the sun, like the happy unheeded nobodies they were.

Down the wood-path we went, and the cuckoos flirted out their notes from the tree-tops, and sat on the oaks and made echoes for us. And there in the middle of the water, throwing bread to her swans, stood the Lady of the Lake in her punt among the lilies : one hand she kept to her pole, but carelessly, so that she drifted ; and with the other she scattered morsels of bread like a snow-shower, while the big white birds put down their long necks and lifted them again, oaring themselves leisurely and with swelling ripples under their breasts. Then the Sinner went down to the reeds and called to her, and she looked up and saw us, and I could hear the water drip from her pole as she poised herself to send it down deep. She came to us, the waves lapping in the shadow of the curved wood with sounds that

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quickened and died again as the punt started and slid over the water.

On my honour, until the reeds bent and rustled by the bank, and the Sinner and the Problem busied themselves with a chain and a spike, I had not thought what I should say to her. The Problem saved me the trouble of thinking. He waved a hand in my direction. "We've come," he said. "He wanted to see you."

She looked at him as he lifted his face to speak to her, and he returned her gaze with unquestioning directness, as if in all the world it were the most natural and proper introduction possible. Then she turned her eyes upon me; and perhaps it was what she saw there (for if ever a poor painter made a sorry show of consternation, I did then), that made her lips twitch and the dimples dance at the corners, and her eyes the while glanced from him to me and back again, till she broke into the merriest peal of laughter, and I perforce with her.

"I hope that is true, at all events," said she.

"I ought to explain," I began. "I am a painter, and your beautiful lake attracted me, and——"

"Oh come," she said, stepping out of her

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punt, "is another explanation necessary? I do not so often get at the truth of things, as to need to shut the lid of the well when I have found it." Her eyes still darkened and lightened with laughter, and she laid a hand on the Sinner's shoulder. "This boy is a cousin of mine; he's not a bad boy in his way, but he's usually in other people's way too. Aren't you?" she added. The Sinner stood quite still, but his gaze was concentrated on a patch of flowers I could see at a corner where some golden-brown butterflies flaunted. He reminded me of a puppy on a chain, with a cat out of his reach; he knew that the hand prohibited an instant escape to the chase. "He's longing now to be off and after those fritillaries." The Sinner looked up at her. "Yes, the fritillaries are out. I thought you would have come to see before. There, now run and be happy." She watched the small stalwart legs carry the owner apace to the corner with an approving smile. "Now this boy," she went on, "doesn't run away like that; he is quite different. When they come down here, he walks about with me, and doesn't bother about the poor butterflies." The Problem glanced at me, and I thought of the Green

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Hairstreak. "But there," she added, "you will be longing to get to work on the lake; I oughtn't to have kept you so long. It is pretty, isn't it? I spend quite a large amount of time in my punt,—perhaps the boys told you? Are you staying at the school?" she went on, without waiting for a reply. "And you have made friends with my boys, it seems? Then I must have a rival; I thought I was the only person honoured. I call them my boys, you see; but I haven't seen them for a long time, and we are going to have great fun this afternoon. You, of course, will be wanting to paint, so we'll leave you and perhaps come back to criticise." And without a word more she was off with a merry nod over her shoulder, and the Problem, not even glancing at me this time, with her.

Here was a pretty state of things! I had not spoken a dozen words to her, and there she left me for the afternoon to make a picture of her lake, and she away with those little ragamuffins picking flowers and catching butterflies. For I watched her to the corner of the path. and before she turned the wood's edge she had raced the Problem for a clump of primroses, caught him away as he began to pick them, and

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put three in his buttonhole. I could see her pull a pin from her coat to fasten them prettily; and then they were round the corner and I saw no more of them.

I went slowly up the path in the opposite direction. At least, thought I, am I not company enough for myself, needing but brush and box and paper? And at length I picked a spot where the sun shone slantwise on the water through a net of beech-leaves, and set myself to paint the calling of the cuckoos into my picture. I could hear beyond the wood the sound and an echo of laughter, and more than once I caught myself with my brush wet with a wash, having forgotten the colour of it. No mood this for a poor painter with a doctor's bill to pay, and I laid my sable about me with some effect, as I thought then. But there was little of the laughter to be heard after a while, because of the cuckoos; and I fell to wondering whether it was not, after all, the associations and memories of the season that set their note to a pleasant tune rather than the actual melody of it, finding a certain monotony in the cadences. Perhaps I was a couple of hours at the picture, and the cuckoos called all the time.

All at once I found that I was not painting

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at all. No, my brush had dried to a stiff point in the sun, and the paper held little but a dull-tinted wash of water and a grey-blue sky and the colours of the trees. My sakes, thought I, but here's a recommendation for another visit ! And I listened before I began again whether there were voices near me, or whether I should have time to turn a respectable amount of white paper a better colour before they were back to me again. And then there was a faint rustle and a hush behind me, and I turned, and there were the Lady of the Lake and the Sinner and the Problem watching me.

The Sinner was jubilant. "Didn't you hear us come ? We've been here ever so long, and you haven't been doing anything but stare at the sky." He came nearer to inspect. "Why, you've hardly painted at all."

Then came another voice. "Did you find it hard to choose the place ?" asked she mischievously, and set her head on one side to criticise. "No one has ever yet actually been drowned in the lake," she added in a melancholy tone. I looked at my easel ; verily, it was gloomy water.

"We've had such fun," went on the Sinner, "all of us. We got tired of looking for butter-

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flies, so we took off our shoes and stockings and went and paddled in the brook and tried to catch the trout. She drove them down to us and I nearly caught one, only it was a minnow. "We've got awfully wet." This seemed to afford him immense joy. "The brook's quite shallow, you know, and there are simply millions of fishes. *She's* got wet, too," he added, nodding.

The Lady of the Lake had, I fancied, started a little at the Sinner's open relation of her doings. Then she laughed, a subdued little chuckle. "Evidently they don't mind what they tell you," said she. "They treat me like a boy, too. Indeed, if I were to see much more of them—when shall you finish that picture?" she broke off abruptly.

I said that I thought I should not continue it; and then I made haste to say that I wished to try another from a different point of view, taking in the house. She looked at the boys and commented on the wetness of them.

"If we catch cold, you will too," said the Sinner; and at that she pretended to shiver and took out her watch.

"Come, we had better be going," said I. And as I shook hands with her she must have

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seen the ill-humour in my eyes, for she turned with a laugh to the Problem and told him to take care of his nosegay and to remember who gave it him. And she kissed the Sinner and was round the corner of the house before I realised that I had not obtained permission to paint a better picture.

CHAPTER IV

A CERTAIN sadness had come upon the Sinner. Indefinable it might be, and capricious ; for there were times when I found him no whit the more melancholy than he was on the day when I first saw him. But without doubt there was a change, and now and then, as the pair of them left me at the sound of the bell, especially in the half-hour before evening-prayer, I fancied I saw an anxious look flit across the Sinner's face, and uneasy glances exchanged between him and the Problem. Of course, there were certain hours of each afternoon set aside for games in which the whole school, and sometimes mine host himself, joined ; and during these games I saw nothing of either boy. But in the odd half-hours sprinkled throughout the day they came with marvellous regularity ; and with the one standing behind me and the other prone on the grass I must have painted, I suppose, long

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enough to have finished a good half-dozen pictures.

But it seemed to me that some depression had clouded the gay spirit of the smaller boy, which communicated itself in turn to the Problem ; for the Sinner was a being of the merriest moods, and I declare I have laughed in his company at things over which I would not have supposed even a conventional smile possible. I thought, too, that I detected a certain difference in the manner in which they were wont to seek out the place where the white of my easel and board showed through the trees. I had bethought me of painting a set of sketches to present to mine host on leaving him (a matter I would have wished to postpone indefinitely, so kindly did he and his lady put up with my presence), and I was busy in drawing the house from whatever points framed best the old turret and the ivy on the walls. Before this uneasy mood came upon them they would search me out with laughter I could hear long before I caught sight of the Problem's tattered straw hat and the small frayed knickerbockers ; but now they came silently, running as often as not, and glancing behind them as though they feared a following,

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though as a matter of fact few of the others had given my box and me more than a passing criticism. Nor was this owing to any prohibition of their presence ; for mine host, when once I had convinced him that I was not annoyed by such graceless companions, had expressed himself mightily pleased that the Sinner had found so harmless an occupation as staring at my paints, and hoped (he was a broad-minded man) that there might be made an artist of him, knowing the boy's propensities for the decoration of things great and small : as to the Problem, he assured me that there was something of genius in that towzled head, could one but get it out of him ; so I allowed the younger boy to make use of my box and brushes and any odd scraps of paper he could find, the while the other lay beside us both, concerned with I know not what odd imaginings.

Now I fancied I might have discovered the key to this mystery when one day I noticed among the trees the figure of another boy, taller than either of these, who shifted his glance as I turned, and occupied himself with carving on the bark of a large ash. True, had it not been for the Sinner's unwonted silence and the anxious gaze which the Problem sent in that

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direction, I might have decided that some one, too shy to satisfy his curiosity by a nearer inspection, was still interested enough in the fact of a painter making a picture of his familiar school-house. But it seemed possible that here was some big person owing an impertinent youngster a grudge, and cowardly enough to wreak his vengeance in odd corners unseen of mine host and his myrmidons. However, I had gained sufficient knowledge of the character of both of these other boys to believe that neither had fear of any man living, much less of a school-fellow possessing a face the Sinner could reach up to. And then it was that the Sinner put me on the right scent.

One evening the figure had followed them as far as the ash-tree, and then stopped and out with his knife as usual. The Sinner stood in silence, watching me and drawing his breath rather quickly. I wondered what might be coming. Then he spoke, and the Problem plucked at a primrose. "Could you lend me threepence?"

Now may my money-pot ever have a hole in it, but I stared at him! Something in his face, however, sent my hand to my waistcoat-pocket in a hurry; I believe he thought I might refuse.

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Luckily I found coppers there, and dropped three into a small palm I found somewhere near me ; and the Problem stopped eating his primrose. The Sinner stood behind me still, but he did not say anything. I should think it was a minute (during which I busied myself with some strange mixture of Hooker and Vandyck that never found its way to paper) before he turned and walked quickly to the school. Then a tall figure slid out from behind the ash-tree and slowly followed him.

The Problem remained with me. After a little he looked up. "He didn't thank you, did he?"

I said that no doubt he was grateful in reality.

"He meant to, though ; he was very grateful. He was waiting, you see, and then I suppose he forgot."

"Waiting for what ?" I asked.

"He thought you would ask him what he wanted it for ; that was why he went away so soon."

"I see," said I, and took up my brushes. When I looked round, I was alone, and the Problem half-way to the school, running as fast as his legs could carry him. And all this pother

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about threepence ! However I determined to question him when he came on the morrow, and get to the bottom of things.

But the Sinner did not come the next day after all, nor the day after, no, nor till near a week later, and only then after certain happenings. At first I imagined him ill, but if so it was strange that I saw nothing of the Problem. Besides, I was soon shown to be wrong on that point, for mine hostess over the teacups asked me to congratulate her on the cleanest bill of health she had been able to show these three years,—not a boy with so much as a surfeit for six weeks past ! Wherefore I could only set down their absence as voluntary, and was the more perplexed. And verily the pair might have deserted me from that day onward, for all I know to the contrary, had it not been that the merest chance put me in possession of the key to all this riddling and mystification. It fell out in this way.

The primroses were not yet over, and I had discovered a convenient little corner among some birch and chestnut trees, which gave me a hill of pale flowers for a foreground and the school-house in the middle distance. I was making my way thither one morning, and was

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looking for the marks of my camp-stool, when I spied alongside the trunk of a felled oak a small book, open, and intended apparently for the pocket. As I picked it up I noticed that it seemed to contain records of various money transactions, and absently ran my eye along a few lines of the page before me. This was headed with the name of a boy, in the upper part of the school, with whom I had, as with many, a nodding acquaintance, and from what I made out he had borrowed a couple of shillings a week ago, the debt now standing at the sum of two-and-fourpence. That was a pleasant rate of interest ! I turned over a few more pages, idly curious, and found that this was no solitary instance of indebtedness, but that the owner seemed to have carried on a regular system of lending out small moneys at interest, the debts mostly, as I saw, unpaid. And then I suddenly bethought me to look for the name of the Sinner ; sure enough there it was.

He had borrowed a shilling five weeks ago. By this usurer's system it now amounted to one-and-tenpence, but somehow that had become reduced to one-and-seven, by reason of a payment on account. And when I found the entry *First instalment, 3d.*, and noted that it coincided with

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the date on which I had lent the Sinner his three coppers, I began to believe I had found some sort of a solution for the difficulty, for of course this publican could be no other than my tall friend of the ash-tree and convenient pocket-knife.

I put that book in my pocket and set up my easel. I suppose I must have painted for more than an hour, perhaps, when the Publican came into the distance. He seemed a little overset at sight of me, I thought, but presently approached his oak-trunk by a circuitous route, wasting time (so far as I was concerned), for I had made up my mind how I should deal with him. When he had satisfied himself that the book was not there, he looked at me inquiringly for a moment, but was for moving off. "Have you lost anything?" I inquired politely.

The Publican turned in mid-stride. "A small book," he said; "nothing of any consequence. I thought I might have left it here."

"Is this it?" said I, holding it up.

His face lit in recognition. "Yes; where did you find it?"

"On the ground, there;" but I did not offer to return it.

He took a few paces forward, a little un-

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certainly. "Thank you very much. It's of no consequence, of course, only it's awkward losing things, isn't it?"

"Very," said I. "Do you want it back?"

"Thank you. It has some—dates in it."

Still I did not do more than hold it in my left hand, the further from him. He had no choice but to come nearer, and I added a few touches to the greens in my foreground.

"That's very good," he said, pointing at my picture. "Any one would know the school from that."

A critic! It enraged me almost more than his note-book. I painted on for a little, and leant back to judge effects. "Don't you think the finder of a valuable work like this deserves a reward?" I asked slowly.

I think he became suspicious then. At least he began to weigh his words. "A reward? I—I don't quite understand. If I could oblige you in any way, you know."

"Yes, oh yes," said I; "I think you could. For instance," I went on, "you might answer me some questions."

"About the school?" he asked tentatively.

"In a way; yes, about—about the school." I believe I must have painted for five minutes

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without speaking. I was enjoying myself immensely; to be sure, it was pure bullying, but I meant it to be. He was a slouching, thick-mouthed person, of a large cat-like gait as he walked. "Come," I said at last, "are you not going to tell me anything?"

"Why don't you give me my book?" he answered, but without much spirit.

"I was thinking of handing it over to the authorities." At this he started slightly, and I let him think it over. "Now this money, I suppose, was lent fairly and squarely?"

"It was my own money. I don't suppose I shall get it all back."

"You haven't the book yet. Don't you think that twopence per shilling per week is—going it a little strong?"

"They agreed to pay it," he said sulkily, rubbing a leg.

"It isn't allowed to lend or borrow money at all, is it?" I asked. This was a bow at a venture. He did not answer, and I made a rough calculation. "Those left-hand pages show the original amount lent?" He nodded. "Supposing that some one were to pay you the sum of the left-hand pages' account, would you consider it satisfactory?"

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He hesitated. "I don't see what it has to do with you."

"I've got the book," said I grimly. And I began again on my primroses.

"You've no right to keep it," he said at last. "If I were to complain about it——"

"Oh, very well," I answered, replacing the book in my pocket ; "then we need not discuss the matter further."

He saw that he had made a false move, and hastened to repair damages. "I didn't mean exactly that," he stammered.

"I thought not," replied I. "Come, what do you say? Money down and no more lending, or——" I guessed a probable effect.

"All right," he interposed, not unwillingly now.

"Of course I must have a written receipt, with names and amounts." I handed him a paper and pencil. "Now I will dictate," I said somewhat unsteadily, for the situation was getting too much for me, who love to laugh, the oftener the better.

Presently he held out the paper, signed for the full amount, and I paid him the money. "Of course I keep the book," I said. But he stood jingling the coins from one hand to the

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other. I am sure he was pleased to see the colour of them ; he smiled in the contemplation. "You've no idea how difficult it was to get that twopence a week," he remarked confidentially.

Heavens ! I believe I stood and shouted at him. And he was off at a hand-gallop, and I in a roar of wrath and laughter.

In the evening I saw the Problem in the distance, and called to him. "Problem," I said, "what does this mean? Where is the Sinner?"

He thought for a minute. "Do you want him?" he asked.

"I do," said I. "Why has he not come before?"

He hesitated. "He will come if I tell him he must."

"Tell him that I wish to see him upon a matter of business," I said solemnly. He walked away slowly, and soon I saw them both coming towards me.

The Sinner came up behind me, and I turned and looked at him. "Where have you been all this time, I should like to know?" I asked. But the Sinner was silent, and the Problem took up the tale. "He wanted to come: we both did ;

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but he hadn't got the threepence for you, and he thought you would ask for it. You see, he has threepence a week pocket-money, and he meant to bring you it at the end of the week, only he broke a window that evening, and that was a month's pocket-money gone, so he knew he could never bring it."

"I see," said I. "It is a serious matter to get into debt, isn't it?" But just then the Sinner was looking so earnestly at the hills in the distance that I turned to the Problem without appearing to notice that I got no answer. The effect when I produced the book was extraordinary. The Problem stood wide-eyed and breathless. "Did you find it?"

"I bought it," said I, and handed him the receipt.

He only half understood it. "Will the boys owe it to you, then? And you won't charge interest?"

I disclaimed any intention of applying for payment. The magnificence of this action almost dumfounded the Problem, but he recovered himself after a prolonged examination of the receipt, and hinted that when this became known there would probably be sent a deputation to thank me. This I said I must courte-

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ously but firmly refuse to receive ; and he stood there looking from the paper at me and back again.

Still I did not understand everything. For instance, why had the Sinner borrowed only threepence ? The other hastened to explain. "You see, the pocket-money for the week before ought to have been paid, only he bought a little knife with it from a shop. And *he* wouldn't believe that, so he followed us about, so we thought perhaps you would lend it till the end of the week."

"But then, I suppose the *next* week's pocket-money was due in the same way ?"

"Yes ; he would have begun to follow us again on Monday."

"And what would you have done then ?"

"Well, you see, we thought you might be going before long, and he couldn't have begun again till the next threepence was due, so we thought that just for that time he would let us alone."

"And when the money went for the window ?"

"We didn't know what to do then. Of course, some boys could write home, but we haven't either of us got any parents,—at least, the Sinner's got an aunt, but she hardly counts,

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I should think, because I've seen her, and she doesn't tip you and that sort of thing. Then, you see, he said he couldn't come and see you paint, because you might ask when he was going to pay you the threepence, and he knew he couldn't pay it. I don't get any pocket-money, of course," he added.

"And if I had gone away before now?"

"Well, we hoped you wouldn't; we used to look in at the dining-room windows to see if your place was laid for lunch; and then you can tell if any one is going in the afternoon by going round to the stables."

"But then, if you were to pay threepence a week, and the interest was twopence in the shilling, you would really only knock off a penny."

The Problem thought for a minute. "I suppose so," he said. "He never borrowed any money before, though, so he didn't know that."

"Wouldn't it have been better to have told all about it to begin with?"

He looked doubtful. "You see, he thought you might have told the masters. And then *he* would have said——"

"I see," said I.

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Just then the bell gave a preliminary tinkle, and I held out a hand to the Sinner, to wish him good-night ; but he was still blinking at the sunset, and I turned again to my easel. When I looked up they had vanished.

CHAPTER V

WHEN mine host bought the old manor-house to make it into a school for such as the Sinner and the Problem, with the Publican to bully them, and the Chief Butler and the Other Man to help him drill empty heads into an understanding of algebra and Cicero, he took the park with it, under his deed of conveyance, or whatever be the name these lawyers set to that in language not understood of the people. Part of this park he turned into a level field for cricket and football in season, and fenced off a part for hay ; and the deer he sold in a pack to a retired soap-boiler, who looked on their dappled flanks with pride from a brand-new French window, having carted them in couples under a net twenty miles away for the greater part of a week.

By one side of the cricket-field ran a path bordering the park. It was long and winding, narrowed to half its original width by encroach-

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ing laurels and rhododendrons, and unless the sun was in the zenith little warmth came to the moss-coated gravel with which it was covered, though here and there at evening were mellow green patches of light that found passage through the branches. At intervals tall oaks and ashes stood up from the even mass of leaves, and beneath these were wooden seats to fit the tree-trunks, grey and lichen-spotted.

Once or twice, because I was lazier than I should have been, I lighted my pipe and strolled along this walk, resolutely dismissing the subject of idle brushes and empty paper. For I am one who finds no truer summary of the nature that is in many of us than this confession of a great writer, that whenever anything assumed the form of a duty, he found himself incapable of discharging it ; and I have felt my only plan on these occasions of rebellion to be voluntary laziness, a kind of truantry. Nor does my art pursue me with cries of *Come back*, nor with any shout that she has a tawse for me behind the easel : she comes to me wooing, and I run back to kiss her ; but she comes to me silent, and looks in my face, and perforce I am her lover again and no truant any more. That is a true love, after all ; and as for those who do set

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themselves to the chase, driving an unwilling pencil where it would not go, rather than work as who must because of the love that calls,—to Jericho with them !

And twice as I walked alone, with no company but my pipe, and a cuckoo in the tree, perhaps, and the noises of the cricket-field coming through the laurels, I met there the figure of a lady : grey-haired she was, but upright and tall, and with a frightened look on her face as she met me ; yet I thought I spied disappointment in her eyes, as if I might have been another. Twice I turned a corner and met her thus, and twice with some apology (I know not what) she turned back again, and I also, for the path was narrow as I have said. One thing I noticed, and that was a small basket on her arm (much as Red Riding-Hood carries her basket of butter and eggs and what not in the pictures), and I guessed at some shopping in the town, for the path led through a gate to the high-road, and there was a town some miles distant where mine hostess had her custom ; but it must have been a long walk, and dusty too, to look at her, poor lady. I was wrong ; she never came from the town, but she had walked far notwithstanding, as I found out later.

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One hot day in June I met her again and heard all about her. It was perhaps a fortnight after my first meeting with the Lady of the Lake, and that had been an unsettled fortnight for me, who ought to have known better ; but I had dragged my easel and all else I needed three times down to the lake and had set eyes on nothing but the water and the trees. Once, indeed, I saw (or fancied I saw) the flutter of a straw hat and flowers by the house-door, but I may have been mistaken ; and at least the Lady of the Lake seemed little anxious to extend her acquaintance with me, if she knew I was there and painting. Three sketches I made, and slapped my thigh for two of them, because I had meant her this time to praise, if she saw my work, and wanted no more references to a lake fit only to drown in.

And then, on an afternoon when the sun was dipping to the trees and the boys were merry over some game of cricket in the field, I saw the poor lady again. Again the dust was heavy on her dress, and still she carried her little basket with care, and again she started and turned back as I met her. And this time, because she walked as if she were tired, and there were lines on her face and the same disappointment in her eyes, I

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made so bold as to follow her quickly and ask if I could do anything for her. Perhaps, I hazarded, she wished to see some one, or to make an inquiry ; but she hardly looked at me as she answered. "I do not think so," she said, "thank you." She was walking away quickly, when suddenly she stopped. "Are you one of the masters?" she asked.

I, the laziest of men ! I hastened to explain that I was not. She looked disappointed again, and I added that I knew both the masters, for that matter ; did she wish to see either ?

"No," she said ; "it was one of the boys I wished to see. I wrote to him a short time ago that I should be here to-day ; I had something to give him. He is sure to come, though ; I would not have mentioned it,—I am his mother," she added inconsequently.

"But it is getting late," I suggested. I explained that I knew some of the boys and could send her son to her. And I asked her to give me his name. When I discovered that it was the Publican, my friend of the usury-system and the note-book, I began to see daylight ; and I began to be much interested in his mother.

The Sinner and the Problem I had noticed

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a while ago setting in my direction,—one, I doubted not, with a plausible explanation for the end of his innings, and the other without it—and just then I heard their voices beyond the turn of the walk. For a moment I thought of sending one of them in search of the Publican, but decided to reserve the business for myself, because I wished to make sure of a meeting. They stopped when they saw I was not alone, and would have made off, I fancy; but I needed them to carry out other plans of mine. “Here are two of the boys,” I said; “they will wait with you while I am away.”

I saw a glance of recognition pass between the pair, which was explained to me afterwards. Then the Sinner advanced with outstretched hand.

“You are one of my son’s friends, I expect,” she said, and smiled at him in a way that made me haste to be off; I was fairly itching to get at this usurer.

“Yes,” said the Sinner; and so I left them.

I found my quarry seated on a bench, attentively regarding a good-looking bat; he had picked it up a bargain. “New?” I asked.

“Yes; that is, I’ve just bought it. I think it’s worth what I gave for it, too.” He was

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a lusty hitter, this Publican, which perhaps accounted for his unquestioned position among his school-fellows.

"Let me look at it," said I ; and, as he rose and began walking by me, I set away from the laurel-walk.

"Five-and-threepence, I gave," he explained. "He wanted seven-and-six, but it isn't worth that,—second-hand, of course ; it wants pegging here and there, too. I shouldn't wonder if it cost another two shillings to have it done up."

I demurred at this, and entered upon an estimate of the business, involving possible outlays of twopence and threepence, till he noticed no longer the direction I was taking. I made a final and comprehensive survey of the wood. "Do you know," said I at last, "I have some good news for you?"

"Won't it cost so much as that?" he asked unsuspiciously.

"Your mother is waiting for you in the shrubbery," I went on.

"Oh," said he, and had the grace to check himself on the point of stopping where he was. He began to fathom my unusual interest in his belongings, and I think determined to make the best of matters. "Is she really?" he asked

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with an air of surprise. "I had no idea of that."

"But she wrote and told you she would be there," said I.

"So she did," he replied, as if confused by the sudden recollection. "I had quite forgotten it; very stupid of me, wasn't it?"

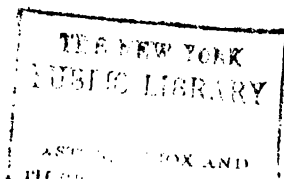
"Very," I said. I remembered taking much the same advantage of this mealy-mouthed creature once before, and that set me drawing another bow at a venture. "She has written more than once," I went on slowly.

He began to look less at ease. "Of course, she doesn't quite understand how much time cricket takes up, and that sort of thing."

"It is a long walk here, though. Had you thought of that?"

He coloured. "I can't think why she does it," he grumbled. "If I were always going to meet her, I should be humbugged to death. I used to be called Apron-strings once for that reason." That, then, was why the Sinner and the Problem recognised the Dusty Lady. "And now that I'm old enough to look after myself one would think——"

"She has brought a basket of things for you." I did not care if she had not, after all;



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but I declare he began to walk quite quickly. "Ah, that's from my brother, I expect ; he's lame, you know."

"Lame?" asked I. Poor lady with the dusty dress !

"Yes ; he had a fall when he was a baby. I'm glad I came," he went on ; " I should like to know how he is."

"And does he send the basket ?"

"Well, he makes up the things into packets. It amuses him, you see ; he hasn't much to do, of course."

"Does he often send them ?"

"He hasn't for some time ; that is, I don't think so. They're nothing very much, of course, only chocolates and that kind of stuff ; but sometimes he sticks a shilling or something of that sort in them, just as a surprise, you know. I sent sixpence of it back, once."

"Did you, though ?" said I. "I suppose you were pretty well off at the time." This was lost on him.

"Yes, that was the reason. But just now,—I wish I had known before," he said. "Usually he writes to say when he is sending a basket ; I expect this was meant as a surprise."

"It is a long way for a walk," I remarked

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again. I did not know where he lived, but I remembered the look of the dust.

"She doesn't seem to think it so," he replied, and saw that he had gone too far. I had let him go, for that matter, but though I am the most peaceful of men, I was glad we were at the turn of the walk where I could hear the Sinner talking.

"Of course, letters do go wrong sometimes," he was saying. "My aunt once wrote a letter——"

But just then she caught sight of the Publican, and the Sinner and the Problem followed my eye and retreated rapidly in my direction.

"Oh, my son, my son!" she cried. I could not help hearing it before we turned the corner.

CHAPTER VI

THE Editors of this little book wish to first assure the reader that they have great sympathy with all the victims whose names are inscribed within. But we think that in nine cases out of ten it has been thoroughly deserved. To prevent this little book from falling into the hands of unscrupulous persons we have referred to the victims by the use of numbers, the key of which can only be obtained from the Editors.

We are,

Yours faithfully,

THE EDITORS.

The boys had left some scraps of paper on which the Sinner had depicted some stirring scenes in the life of a Scots soldier, a person he was never tired of putting through his paces. I had lifted one of these studies (its kilted hero was engaged in piercing a Red Indian with a spear, the while he discharged countless bullets at a distant host of warriors), and underneath it

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lay a small book ; there was no name on the cover, and I opened it supposing I had lit on a note-book,—Virgil made easy or Cicero simplified. The first page interested its reader, as an “unscrupulous person,” sufficiently to court further exploration.

At 12.45 on February 17th no. 1 received a summons to the study. Upon knocking at the door he was told to come in and sit down on a chair. It appears he had been complained of by his formaster for being a thoroughly idle and good-for-nothing fellow and what had he to say for himself. As he could not think he was told to kneel upon the chair and was immediately aware of an excruciating pain which was caused by the collision of something he could not see. When this had been repeated four times he was told he might go and he hoped this would not occur again.

No. 14 on February 20th received four strokes of the bat. As this is the first time that a bat has been used in these painful scenes we wish to explain that the bat is a flat piece of wood somewhat like unto a brush. He was told that his form-master had reported him for thoroughly idle work in Euclid and he had no doubt from what he heard that this was true he departed much relieved as it was a cold day. Before he left he heard the headmaster say he

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thought that would do meaning the bat this he did not deny.

Fiat experimentum, commented the Unscrupulous Person.

On March 3rd no. 8 was told to present himself at the head-master's door. This boy had placed a duck in a school-fellow's desk which flew out in school causing much merriment. He was told that this sort of thing must be put a stop to for it could not be allowed to go on as it upset the work of the class and must be put a stop to. The headmaster then rendered him five strokes of the bat.

No. 8 on March 14th was sent up to the headmaster and soundly breeched. He had been thoroughly idle and inattentive and if things went on in this way matters would come to a crisis as this could not go on.

On March 3rd no. 3 received six strokes. This fellow had been most unruly and insubordinate and had said to his formaster Speak up will yer when he was making a speech. As this was not the first time such things had occurred he was told he had better be careful as this was not at all the sort of thing that ought to occur as he was expected to do better than this.

No. 8 on April 1st was sent for at 10.45 as was expected considering he had peppered the headmaster's desk. This headmaster told him

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to wait as he was busy and when he had waited half-an-hour he came in and said Now sir what is the meaning of this ? he was told to kneel upon the sofa and the headmaster took his dred instrument in hand but suddenly he said he might go this time and this must not occur again he departed thinking he was a decent chap the headmaster was laughing so he felt a fool.

Here there was a gap seemingly accounted for by the holidays.

“On May the forth no. 8.”

The Sinner was running across the cricket-field as fast as his legs could carry him. The Unscrupulus Person laid the book on the ground by his side.

“Does a Scotchman—oh, have you read it ?”

“I was wondering how you caught the duck, Sinner.”

“Oh, well, that was a long time ago. Does a Scotchman have a busby ?”

“As a general rule,” said the Unscrupulus Person, “a Scotchman does have a busby.”

CHAPTER VII

THE garden-boy's jackdaw had fallen ill of an inscrutable disease, and the Problem was called into consultation. He had something of a name as a physician, having bound up the coachman's canary's broken leg, so that it lived a happy one-footed existence for six months after, and died on a frosty night full of hempseed and honour. There was a story, too, of a poulticed cat, which did him infinite credit, and it was hoped he might find something worth trying on this jackdaw, to set a crown on past triumphs. But he was called in too late, it was thought; for in the afternoon news came to me that the miserable bird had given up the ghost in a sudden fit at the bottom of its cage. Apoplexy caused by a surfeit was the verdict, and from what I knew of the creature it was as likely as any other.

"Did you see it die?" the Sinner asked with morbid interest.

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"Of course I did," answered the Problem, professionally curt.

"Did it die just ordinarily?"

"What do you mean?" asked the Problem.

"I mean, what did it look like? Did it just lie down and stop moving, or did it fly on to its back, and kick its legs in the air, and caw till it was dead?"

"It just humped itself up and fell off its perch," said the Problem. "It opened its beak two or three times; they usually do that."

"Oh," said the Sinner, manifestly disappointed, "I thought perhaps it would have done more than that. I thought it would have flown about. My aunt's parrot, you know, was dying once, only it got well; and it lay on its back and said all the words it knew as fast as it could, and then it shut its eyes and we thought it was dead, but it bit the servant, so we knew it wasn't. Oh, and did you ask him?" he concluded irrelevantly.

"Yes," said the Problem; "he said you could have it. He didn't see any use in things when they were dead, he said."

"You can bury them," said the Sinner.

Later in the day I was called to inspect the tomb. It appeared to be the latest addition to

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a cemetery situated in some waste ground beyond the laurels of the side-walk where the Dusty Lady met her son. There was a considerable hillock of freshly-dug earth. "It must have been a very large jackdaw," I ventured.

"We buried it in a box," explained the Sinner; "at least, a tin, a biscuit-tin. You see, when there is a good deal of earth left over you can make a better grave. Sometimes it's quite difficult to make a grave, when it's only a robin or a mouse, or something like that."

The bigger mound, the better grave, it seemed. I remarked on the number of tombs, of which there must have been at least thirty. The Problem supplied an answer. "He buries everything; whenever anything dies, he goes and asks if he can have it. Sometimes he gets things from the village, because the servants know about it. They bring the bodies in boxes."

"Are they all pets, then?"

"No, not all. Some of them he picks up, you know, if they haven't been dead very long. It's a sort of collection really."

The majority of the graves were heaps of earth, beaten into churchyard shape, and here and there (I thought) renewed or supplemented

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where the mound had sunk level. A few were decorated with the commoner sorts of flowers ; pansies and forget-me-nots mostly, but there were straggling clumps of primroses and violets over the larger barrows. In one corner were three mounds side by side, of a larger size than the rest and with headstones of slate. On these were painted suitable inscriptions. I pointed to one bearing the legend, *Joe, Faithful unto death*. "What was this ?" I asked.

"Those are cats' graves," replied the Sinner, surveying his handiwork with pride. "That one was the odd man's cat, at least it used to follow him about. Only one day the postman's dog worried it and it died."

"And did the odd man ask you to bury it?"

"No ; I asked him. I think he was glad, because I said it could have an epistle."

"An epistle?"

"Written on the tombstone. That was what he asked me to put,—*Faithful unto death*. He was very fond indeed of that cat."

"Was it a pretty cat?"

"Yes, I think so, all except his ears ; it had hardly any ears. He used to give it bread and beer ; and after it was killed,—oh, I forgot, you can see its grave." The Sinner pointed to

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a somewhat larger heap in the background, made conspicuous by a solitary gentian but without a slate at head or foot.

"But I thought you said this one with *Joe* on it,—I don't understand ; has it got two graves?"

"Oh no," said the Sinner ; "that's a dog's grave, the postman's dog. The odd man killed it, you see."

"Good gracious ! On purpose?"

"Oh yes. He was leaving at the end of the week, and he wanted to be even with the postman, he said, for killing his cat. He gave me the body."

"And can't it have a tombstone,—the dog, I mean?"

"Well, the odd man didn't want it to have one. Of course, the postman didn't know it was buried here, and I think he thought if we put a tombstone he would find out."

"And did he never find out?"

"No. He's gone now, though, that postman ; he married the cook. I was sorry that cook went," said the Sinner thoughtfully.

"Why?"

"Oh, well, she used to give you things."

"Bodies, do you mean?"

"No, biscuits and things. She did give me

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a kitten, though, once." He pointed to the grave next to Joe's.

"Was Jimmy a kitten, then?"

"Yes, it was drowned."

"But if it was drowned——"

"It fell into the cistern. I had to dry it, because I only had a cardboard box for it."

"If it was only a kitten, how does its grave come to be as big as Joe's?"

The Sinner looked puzzled. "I don't know," he said eventually. "At least, I think——"

"I remember," said the Problem. "You got some extra earth because you said there wasn't enough; you wanted it to match the other two."

A little beyond the last resting-places of Joe and Jimmy another grave attracted my attention. It appeared to be a twin grave, if one might call it so, only instead of the two barrows lying side by side, they were placed lengthwise, in a kind of tandem. A wooden cross was planted at the head of the leader, so to speak.

"Oh, that one? That was a guinea-pig; Prince, its name was, only it's faded."

"And what was the name of the other one?"

"The other one? There isn't another one," said the Sinner,

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"This," I said, tapping the mound above the body of the tandem's wheeler.

"That's Prince," said the Sinner.

"Good heavens!" said I. "Do you mean it's all the same animal, this and that?"

"Yes," said the Sinner seriously. "It—that one was buried in two parts."

"Mercy on us! So as to make more graves, I suppose."

"We couldn't help it. We only found half of it at first, you see. It was a fox took it, the gardener said. It was in the winter, and we found its body in the hutch because the door was open; and then about a week afterwards a boy found its head under a bush. We couldn't dig up its body again, you see, so we made an extra grave for its head."

A medium-sized mound next to the tomb of a canary attracted me. The inscription *Fido* was painted in white on a tarred cross. "This, I suppose, was a dog, was it not?"

"Oh no; that was a duck."

"A duck? A duck named Fido?" And then I knew I ought not to have laughed. The Sinner looked ashamed; he was very proud of his cemetery, and had not thought ridicule possible.

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"Well," he admitted after a little, "it hadn't got a name you see. It died very suddenly and,—and the gardener gave it me. I had to put something on the cross, of course, and I couldn't think of any other name. Do you think it had better be altered?" he asked respectfully.

"No, Sinner, no; certainly not; it does beautifully." He looked at me with uncertainty. I tried to make amends. "I suppose you have to name them, or else you wouldn't know which was which,—isn't that it?"

"Yes," said the Sinner, brightening; "that's it; and besides, you wouldn't know where they were. At first, you see, I didn't have names. Only one day I dug up the cat again because I had forgotten where it was. That was before I put mounds, too; I used to stamp it down level instead. I think it looks better like this, don't you?"

"Much better," said I. "These are all birds, in this part, are they?"

"Yes. There's another one I had to name in the corner; that one with Lucy on it."

"And who was Lucy?"

"That was the name I put. It wasn't a pet exactly; at least, one day there was a chicken for dinner, and it wasn't quite good or something,

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so the masters left it and the cook gave it me."

"But she is in her grave," I found myself murmuring. The Sinner looked at me quickly ; but I was more successful in keeping my countenance over Lucy's fate than I had been over that of Fido. A question occurred to me. "You never tried to cremate any of them, I suppose ? Burn them, I mean."

The Problem became interested. "Oh yes, don't you remember ? That was one of the public ones."

"Public ?" asked I.

"He didn't tell you that ; he has two kinds of burials, you know. Private ones are when no one is there except him and the person to whom it belongs."

"And the others ?"

"Well, anybody can come to the public ones ; there were quite a lot of boys when we had the burning one."

"What did you burn ?"

"It was a rat," said the Sinner ; "rather a pretty one, piebald—it had been trodden on."

"And what did you do ? I mean, how did you manage it all ?"

The Sinner hesitated. "That's the place,"

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he said, indicating a very small mound under a nettle. "At least—well, you see, we made a little pile of sticks and things and put the rat on it, only just after we had set fire to it the school-bell rang, so we had to leave it. The wind blew it about rather, I think, because the ashes were all scattered over the grass. We couldn't find the rat exactly. We put the ashes in a tin and buried them there."

"Tell me about a burial. What do you do?"

The Problem volunteered a description. "Well, they bring the body to just outside the laurels. Then the person who is helping bury it puts the box on the wheel-barrow and wheels it to where the Sinner has dug the grave, and the Sinner takes it off the barrow and puts it in. Then he asks the person if he is going to say anything, because he won't see it again. So the person says good-bye, and then the Sinner shovels in the earth and asks if they would like a cross or a slate."

"And which do they choose generally?"

"A slate," said the Sinner.

I looked round involuntarily; there were only three slates,—over the cats. As soon as I had done so I mentally objurgated my thought-

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lessness, for the Sinner caught my eye, and became confused. "Of course," he explained, looking at me doubtfully, "it's rather difficult to get slates, so very often there has to be a cross instead."

"You keep the slates for the more important animals, I suppose?"

"Yes; the dog, you see, was really the biggest, but that mightn't have one, the odd man said."

I seemed to recollect the death of a goat which belonged to the place, and said so.

"I wasn't allowed to have that," the Sinner explained. "I did ask. But the gardener was making something by one of the greenhouses, and he wanted it for that," he said. "I don't know what it was. I've never buried anything as big as a goat," he added rather wistfully, and relapsed into meditation over the picture of a goat on a wheel-barrow and a very large grave.

I could not help wondering what he would consider a fit name to place on the sepulchre of a goat; but I was saved from further committing myself by the sound of the school-bell. The two boys trotted off, the Sinner still absorbed in contemplation.

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It happened that later in the year I was present at one of these burials ; it was a private one, and the hero was a rabbit. Along the edge of the cemetery ran a fence, and I was sitting with my easel on the far side when I heard the sound of voices close at hand. I was so placed that I could see absolutely nothing, and I could only make guesses as to what was happening with the wheel-barrow. I heard it creaking over the heavy ground, and a jolt now and then followed by silence.

"That's enough," said the Sinner. There was a pause ; I imagined that the body was being lowered into the grave. "It's a pity we couldn't get a box," came the Sinner's voice. "I've had such a lot of burials lately, of course. The matron said she hadn't one left."

A further pause suggested that they were probably gazing at the body.

"Do you want to say anything?" asked the Sinner. I heard afterwards that the owner of this rabbit was a child of seven or so, quite the smallest boy in the school. I fancy the whole affair was as solemn as the Sinner could make it.

There was silence, and then a small voice said, "What ought I to say?"

The Sinner was thinking. "Say, 'Oh Lord,

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this is my rabbit.' You had better say good-bye, too," he added after a minute or two. There was a faint murmur indicative of an attempt to say farewell. I heard the shovel grate as the Sinner filled it. Then came a resounding thump, as a large clod fell on the rabbit's body, followed by an exclamation of dismay. "I say, I do believe it moved !"

The clod, I thought, was lifted and probably the temperature of the rabbit taken. "No, it is dead," was the assurance ; and once more the shovel grated in the heap. Soon there were sounds as of loose earth beaten into shape, and I imagined the formation of a new mound,—the forty-first, if I remembered right. Then came a subdued sigh.

"And would you like a slate or a cross over it ?" But I think from the tone in which he asked the question, the Sinner knew that the wrong answer was inevitable.

CHAPTER VIII

It came about in this way. I had settled with them for an expedition to a certain spinney, distant perhaps a mile or so ; they were to attempt the capture of a hawk's nest believed to exist in a hollow elm, and I was to sketch the central glade of the place,—a delightful opening of young bracken with grey rock right and left, and a tiny streamlet bubbling from pool to pool between. We were to start at half-past two ; but when I had waited half-an-hour at the top of the chestnut-avenue and there was no sign of either of them, I began to wonder if we had understood each other, and the thought crossed my mind that possibly they were waiting for me elsewhere. Wherefore, deciding this to be the only explanation of their absence, I returned to the house and made inquiries ; as a result, I learned that they had set out for the spinney near an hour ago.

I was a little annoyed at this, for it was one

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of the hottest days of the year, and dusty roads have but few attractions for me. I had found, too, no better recipe for the beguilement of such a tramp as this than the presence of my pair of tireless, irresponsible youngsters, and therefore I compassed my two miles in no easy humour. I abused my calling, and vowed never to stir out of a studio for the rest of my life. Walking for walking's sake I have always detested; not perhaps to the extent of a certain friend of mine, whose sole ambition in life was a bungalow, basing a cynical view of existence on the ever-present necessity of stairs. Poor fellow! for when his wish was realised, he found that his spirit would take no rest unless nearer by fifteen feet to heaven at night; he could not sleep on the ground-floor.

And when I came to the spinney, and, setting my easel and all against a rock, stood and shouted, they were not there. A magpie clattered out of a thorn-bush,—one for sorrow, thought I—and then another, to make light of the proverb: a jay barked at me angrily and glinted, blue and pink, to the covert; and a pair of crows sailed in higher circles in the hot ring of sky. Beyond the wood I could see a gipsy-encampment, van and horses, laid lazily

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in the shade of a clump of elms ; three bare-footed children shaded their eyes and gazed suspiciously in my direction—a keeper, thought they, and would warn their men-folk. But of my pair of graceless nobodies there was not a sign.

Still the air blew about me clean and flower-scented, and the sun shone so gladly on the green branches, and the water raced so merrily over the mosses and pebbles, that I soon had my picture chosen and began washing in my ground-tints. And by seven o'clock I had made so fair a start that I tossed up a prayer for fine weather and was off homewards, composing the while a flawless lecture on the merit of punctuality,—I who have kept more men waiting than would fill a Blue-book.

But at the gate I was met by mine host, and when he saw that I was alone, and heard that the two children had played me false, he was perplexed not a little. For it seemed that they (I had forgotten it) should have returned an hour back, for evening preparation or some such necessary discipline. At first he had laid the blame freely on myself, but now he was puzzled where to lay it, for the Sinner and Problem, many and varied as their escapades had been, never had gone so far before as to disregard

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conventionalities to the extent of more than a few minutes' quarrel with the school-clock in the momentous matter of preparation-time.

A thought struck me (not unwelcome in one sense, owing to the possibilities involved), that they might have come to some accident (a wetting perhaps) in company with the Lady of the Lake. And mine host thanked me from his heart (ignorant man !) when I offered to see if it were so. Off, then, I set to the lake, and found my Lady in the garden.

But she had neither heard nor seen anything of them, and I could find but little excuse for prolonging the interview. And to tell the truth, this was the only occasion when I made my talk with her shorter than I need have, for I was anxious to be away on a new quest ; I had remembered the gipsies by the spinney. She made light of my anxiety, and repeated that there was no need to expect anything but that they would return before nightfall with the laugh against us. I was not so certain of it ; mine host had sterner notions of school-boy proprieties. She changed the subject to my paint-box, and I confessed to some hard work since last I saw her, part of the work being to decide what not to sketch.

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"You can come to that decision easily at times," said she.

"I do not always paint a gloomy picture," I answered.

"Did you finish that one?" she asked.

"But I often paint my mood into a bright one," I continued.

"I see." Her eyes danced under the lashes, and the corners of her mouth began to twitch.

"That might have been a bright picture too," I observed ; but she was already ten yards off towards the house. "Good-bye," she said. "And don't add to your sorrows by puzzling over those two small friends of yours. Bo-peep and the sheep,—and they'll bring their tales with them, you may be sure." But she again stopped before she had gone very far. I halved the distance between us. "Do you care for interiors?" she asked with an air of seriousness.

"That depends upon the furniture," replied I.

She appeared to consider matters. "There's a tea-table," she said. "Suppose you brought the boys for me to scold,—let me see—on Sunday?"

"If I can find them for you," said I, adding the last two words to please myself. Verily, I

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believe if I had not had my object in coming to think over I should have thrown my hat in the air, when once round the corner. And yet the gods willed it that I never took advantage of that invitation ; at least not the advantage I foresaw then.

There was no news of them waiting for me at the school ; and I earned more gratitude from mine host (who was beginning to be seriously alarmed) by an offer to search the gipsy-encampment. To aid me he offered a gig and one of the fat roans (a most unwilling conscript) and a stalwart gardener in addition to our driver. Under these conditions the two miles were covered again quicker than they had been six hours before in the afternoon.

But here was another disappointment. From the cunning-faced women and bronzed hard-visaged men that hemmed in the kettle and tripod we could learn nothing. Only the bare-footed children told a strange tale of voices that filled the spinney when the sun was high ; outlandish oaths and echoes of oaths they reported. At any other time I should have caught at the chance of such models, for the fire of the wood-embers on one side and the glow of the western sky on the other threw quaint shadows and lights

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on their clear-cut bronze limbs and weather-tanned faces ; and there were old women in the back part of the group whose eyes were riddles and histories for any who could read them. But I was in no mood to pick a model then ; and supposing it possible that these sun-burned thieves were concealing their knowledge in the hope of a reward, I believe I valued the Sinner and the Problem at five pounds apiece, to the astonishment of my comrade the gardener, who was for turning the van inside out there and then. But all I read on their faces when I made the offer was genuine regret that they were unable to deserve it.

Back, therefore, we went to the school, and saddened mine host with the tale of our ill-success. He, good man, had already made communication with the local constable, yet in small hope of obtaining much from that worthy, whose office for ten years past had meant little more to him than the peaceful occupancy of a cottage and apple-orchard. Nothing to be done, said he, but to wait for the daylight. There were lanterns,—but where to look ? For the strange part of it all was that no one had set eyes on either of the boys, except to watch them out of the gate, since luncheon.

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To bed and sleep, then, they went, but I sat waiting with my pipe in the heavy-curtained little smoking-room, and the cuckoo-clock in the hall clucked out the hours with springs and whirrings and the slap of a shut door, till a blackbird woke in the laurels and whistled that morning had come, and I threw open the windows.

Out in the garden the dew lay heavy and grey on the lawn, but my blackbird roused his companions, and soon a merry chorus thrilled from every bush and tree. With a towel under my arm I strode out to the garden-pump; and the sluicing of that bright cold water left me clear and strong for a long day's work if need be. I had it in my mind to pull the fat roan out of his stall and drive him into the town; but that, I considered after, could help me very little till the townsfolk were out of bed. And finally I made up my mind to walk there, which I did, but without much hope of better luck with the town-constables. Nor were my expectations groundless, for the bluff, good-natured fellows had no news for me. At the inns I fared no better, and finally made haste to the junction, to catch the train back to the signal-box and wood-planking which served us in these parts

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for a station. And whom there should I see but the Chief Butler, grave, black-hatted, and important in bearing? "What news?" I asked.

"Well," said he, "I'm off to Axham. The police have telegraphed news of two boys there, who answer very fairly to ours, looking for a ship."

"Is that so? But then,—they could only have got there by rail: the place is thirty miles away; and no boys have asked for tickets."

"*I* don't know," said the Chief Butler, who was visibly annoyed at having the journey to take. "All *I* know is that if I find them——" It was a dire aposiopesis. "However, I'm paid for a first return," he soliloquised, stepped into a third-class carriage, and was twenty yards away from me before I had time to ask more of the telegram.

It was past eleven before I found myself at the school-gates, and visions of cream and coffee, rich red hams and new-laid eggs began to take the place of a certain picture I had been troubled with; a picture of two weary little forms trudging along a dusty road, heaven knows with what object or whither,—trust the Sinner for some mad project! But if I had known twelve hours before what I was to learn

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before the morning was out,—certes, but I should never have heard that blackbird wake in the laurels!

There were more thanks from mine host, and regrets at my useless journey. He relied strongly on the Axham telegram. "Of course," said he, "of course; some crazy sea-going notion,—silly boys, silly boys! But I'd wish them here, I'd wish them here," he repeated. "It never happened before, never before. I'd sooner have lost any boys than those two," he added. I knew he would have said this of any of the boys, but I liked him for it nevertheless. He then went into the school-rooms, and I heard afterwards that many a lazy youngster blessed his stars that his dominie's mind was occupied with other matters, and took small note of false concords and impossible cæsuras. Marks ran high for the dullards that morning.

As for me, I wandered into my own room, and (I cannot tell with what prescience) idly took up a book I had been reading yesterday. Out tumbled a piece of paper I had never put there, a message, a letter from the Sinner, and folded three-cornerwise as I had taught him. "We are going to make an encampment on the

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river. Will you come and help us? From your affectionate Sinner."

Now when I have news of that sort I have no inclination to hurry and scramble. My thoughts come to me quickly, but they do not tumble helter-skelter, and they ran somewhat in this order.

The matron had reported the absence of the Sinner's and the Problem's travelling-rugs; therefore they meant to sleep at their encampment. They had no money; therefore they must be short of provisions, for they had not let the Lady of the Lake into the secret, and could only have abstracted a few crumbs of bread and a biscuit or so. If they had come to any accident, I must be quick, but must take some necessaries with me. If they were drowned, I reflected, there was no hurry; but I knew they were not. Their encampment must lie up-stream,—the same stream that fed the lake, for it alone was known as the river; down-stream the water ran between open banks and the town.

And at last,—perhaps five minutes after I had the letter—I had sent a note to mine host that I was off on another expedition, with what hopes I did not say. I had stuffed my pockets

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with some hastily-cut sandwiches, a flask of brandy (I laughed over this at the time) and a roll of lint, which never was meant for the use to which I put it, and was off down the fields to the head of the lake ; nor as I went could I help laughing, despite my own uncertainties, at the certainty of the Chief Butler's failure. However, he was to make some pence over his journey ; an entry for the black leather book.

It was a blazing hot day. Up above in the cloudless blue a brazen sun glared and burned, and not a breath stirred the full foliage of the oaks and ashes, not a whisper of air moved in the undergrowth. Once I came to a bush of sweetbriar, and the dew-begotten scent steamed round me as I passed it. A pair of rabbits bobbed off into the covert, and the white scut of one of them paused over the scratched earth. I clapped my hands, and the burrow was brown and empty.

Soon I was at the head of the lake, crossed the little wooden bridge, and took my course up-stream. I chose the left bank, for the other was impassable in places ; they could not have gone that way. The May-flies, that happy, light-winged crowd of ephemerals, were dead

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and done with by now : just here, earlier in the year, grey drake and green drake were balancing five on a flower, and the fat spotted trout were filling their bellies with quiet, sucking gulps at them as they caught in the water-way ; but now the meadow-sweet and willow-herb sparkled with tiny restless dragon-flies, needles of sapphire and emerald, poised and counterpoised to each other in a gay cotillon of courtship. Here and there a water-rat fell plump in the dark water,—a diamond bubble to mark his track—rose softly, brushed silver water from his back against silver reeds, and plumped in the pool again,—you could see the dints of his little feet in the mud. Water-hens paddled nervously in and out of the rushes, and a pair of dabchicks played hide-and-seek in the weeds,—plenty of havoc they had made with the trout-spawn, I knew. Once a kingfisher darted up-stream, just a flash of shot turquoise. And over all the sun shone, brazen, parching, resistless.

I dare say I had walked close on a mile, when something white on the bank caught my eye ; it was a litter of shavings,—some one had cut a withy. A little further were more shavings, and the willows had been partly pol-larded. And then I turned a corner, and coming

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on a strange picture, leaned behind a tree-stem to take it in.

A small clearing in the undergrowth left a green patch of grass running down to the sedge of the stream's bank. At the back of this three hazel-clumps, their upper branches arched over and tied to make a roof, were fenced round with intertwined withies and bracken, hardly leaving an air-hole. In the recess of this arbour were two neatly folded rugs, and two bows, trimly pared, also of bent hazel, stood with a bundle of black-feathered arrows against the side. These arrows were tipped with twisted strips of lead, and the hackles were fastened with thin string. A very small dead rabbit, pierced through and through with one of the arrows, hung over a cross-branch, legs together, the feathers on the notched end of the wood draggled and disarranged. The remnants of a wood-fire spread in a little grey pile on the edge of the water, the herbage having been cut short for a yard on either side. The skin of another very small rabbit was stretched on the bark of a large oak in the background. At the entrance of the arbour were strewn two heaps of clothes.

In the centre of a flattened circle of grass lay

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the Problem, his head on his elbows, staring lazily at the water. A few yards up-stream a huge willow bent over the pool, and on the horizontal stem of it stood the Sinner, balancing himself by a branch, the sun on him full and warm and the water below dark and cool. The moss of the bank had deadened my footsteps, and neither of them had seen me.

Presently the Sinner let go his branch, poised himself, took the prettiest header into the pool, swam slowly to the bank and clambered out gleaming. He stood for a minute on the edge, glanced round, and caught sight of me. "Oh, have you really come? Are you going to stay with us?"

I stepped into the clearing and the Problem sat up and regarded me. The grass-bents marked him in a quaint criss-cross pattern. "Where are your towels?" I asked.

The Sinner looked round with a meditative air. "I believe,—we've only got a handkerchief," he said.

The Problem also considered matters. "You didn't bring yours, you know," said he; "so there's only one, in my pocket."

"Get it," said I. It was extracted, and proved to be of minute dimensions with a

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spotted border. The pair of them stood watching me.

"I'm very nearly dry," began the Problem apologetically.

I surveyed him. "You may put on your clothes."

The Sinner looked rather taken aback. "Shall I dress too?" he asked. I gave him the handkerchief and—to what strange uses!—the roll of lint from my pocket.

He looked at me uncertainly. "Are you angry with us?" he asked in a subdued voice.

"I shall not speak to either of you until you are dressed; then I shall have something to say to you." I spoke very severely, and the Sinner, retreating in the direction of his clothes, began smoothing and rolling up the soaked lint.

"Put that down," I said, "and dress." He dropped it with a start, and began to dress hurriedly, getting into his garments the wrong way round, and out again with an apprehensive look at me. The Problem clothed himself methodically and silently with an air of abstraction. I sat down with my back against a pollard.

Presently the Sinner, halfway through his

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task, paused, hesitated a moment, and came quickly across to me. "Oh, don't be angry, please don't. We didn't think——"

"Be quiet," I said sternly, and he returned to the difficulties of his collar. I bethought me of my pipe, and lit it ; feeling that I wanted something to occupy me, much as your actor has to learn what to do with his hands. When the blue smoke was lifting kindly, I looked up. The Problem had finished dressing and was picking burrs off the Sinner's coat ; except that his face had a little more colour he seemed much as usual. The Sinner,—well, the Sinner was very quietly but very unmistakably weeping. I fell to examining a dead leaf with interest. A stifled sob made me glance at the boys again, and I saw that the spotted handkerchief (dripping) was being used for normal purposes. Matters became too much for me. "Come here, both of you," I said, and blew smoke into the sun slowly and judicially. The Sinner choked manfully and dropped the handkerchief. They stood before me, and I surveyed them with calmness, I hope. "Now, what have you to say for yourselves?"

There was silence. The Problem shifted uneasily from one leg to the other. Then

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the Sinner said, with odd little jerks between the words: "We did not think *you* would be angry. We thought you would understand. We meant—meant——" But what he meant became more than he could manage to tell me just then, and I had recourse to my pipe again.

When he was quiet I spoke. I found that it was best, while speaking, to gaze steadfastly at a fixed point in the landscape. A rook on a far elm suited me admirably. "Before I speak to you of the anxiety your absence has caused,"—(the rook flapped and was off—I rose)—"I should like to ask you a few questions." This method of procedure appeared to me desirable in two respects; it mystified the Sinner and the Problem, and allowed me to walk about while making inquiries. I could not have kept my countenance long with those two wide-eyed, sorrowful ragamuffins standing dumb before me. I went to the arbour. "How did you make this?" I asked.

"We cut some willow-branches——"

"Exactly; you cut some willow-branches. Now, to whom do those willow-branches belong?" There was no answer. "You see what I mean? It is other people's property."

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"They're very little ones," suggested the Sinner. "She said——"

"Do not tell me what she said. Did you obtain permission?" Again there was no answer. "This is a very little one, too," I said, indicating the suspended rabbit. "Which of you killed it?"

The Sinner brightened visibly. "I got them both," he began quickly. "They——"

I was examining the arrow. "You have poked this through further than it went at first, have you not?"

The Sinner nodded. "He thought it looked better," explained the Problem. "Besides, it wasn't,—it wouldn't die, you see."

"It came hopping out," went on the Sinner; "it and the other."

"Was it far off?"

"No, not very far; at least, about two yards. I was afraid it would run away, and it didn't seem to be looking, you see, so I shot it."

"And the other?"

The Sinner regarded me doubtfully; I was speaking with great sternness. "Well, the other, you see, was washing its face. It licked its paws and then rubbed them on its nose; and

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I had one shot at it, but it missed, and so it stopped, and then it sat up again and went on washing itself. So I hit it in the chest."

"Was this one far off?"

"It—it was about three yards off, farther than the other. The Problem said I ought to have taken it unawares, but I should think I did, because it didn't seem to know I was going to shoot it."

"Where is it now? I mean, this is the skin; where is the rest?"

The Sinner looked rapidly about him. Then he darted to a big dock-plant, and took something from behind it. "Here's its head," he said; "we cut it off. You don't,—do you want to see the inside?" he asked respectfully, glancing at the dock-plant.

"The legs," said I hastily, "the legs, where are they?"

"Well, we—we ate some, you see, for supper. We roasted it by the fire; it wasn't very nice," he added thoughtfully. "The cook at my aunt's——"

"I do not wish to hear about the cook at your aunt's. What else did you have?"

"Bread," said the Sinner promptly; "we got a loaf from the baker when he came yesterday."

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"Did you pay for it?"

"No; we just asked him for it and he gave it us."

"Sinner," said I, "you are wonderful. That is to say, your conduct——" But I had made a slip, and he saw that in a twinkling.

"Oh, don't be angry any more," he said appealingly. "We didn't mean——"

"Look here," I said. "Here are you two boys; you ask to come with me for a walk to find a hawk's nest, and then after keeping me waiting half-an-hour you don't come; you have gone off somewhere else. You frighten everybody at the school till they are at their wits' end; you keep me sitting up for you all night, and looking for you from three o'clock in the morning. I haven't been to bed, and I don't suppose that any of your masters have slept a wink all night. One of them went off early this morning to Axham to look for you. I walked myself to Overdon to ask about you: I drove six miles yesterday night to a gipsy-camp to see if you were there; and the police have been searching for you since seven o'clock last evening. The police," I repeated with emphasis.

The Sinner grew pale as I spoke. The

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Problem (I knew it even then) saw through me ; still, he listened with attention.

"But I wrote you a letter," began the Sinner.

"Why did you not tell me straight out?"

There was no answer. "He only thought of it before dinner," put in the Problem ; "and after dinner you weren't in your room, so we left a note in the book."

"H'm ; but—I don't know, it seems to me incomprehensible. How long did you mean to stay here ? What did you think would be the end of it all ? What were you to eat ?" The Sinner glanced at the rabbits. "And what if it rained ? And—by the way, do you know what the time is ?" They shook their heads. "Past one o'clock. Well," said I cheerfully, "I suppose you will be having lunch soon ; so will I."

I retired to a mossy stump in the background, took out my sandwiches and spread them invitingly ; then I pulled out my flask, measured a small portion of spirit, filled that up at the pool and returned to my stump. The two boys watched me in silence. I began on a sandwich, taking no notice of them. They watched me for a little while, and then the

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Sinner nudged the Problem and turned to the stream. He stood with his back to me and looked hard at the distance. "Come," said I, and he faced me very quickly. "I've brought my lunch, you see. I thought it would save you trouble. Don't mind about me, go on with yours. But perhaps you've had it already?" The Sinner shook his head. "Well, there's that rabbit, you know; you had better make a fire and cook it."

The Sinner glanced at the tiny heap of ashes, and then at me, and then at the rabbit.

"There's plenty of wood," said I; "or do you want a match? Ask me for anything you want."

The Sinner touched the Problem's arm, and set off manfully to gather wood. He brought a bundle of bracken, which the Problem arranged, and then some sticks. Then came a pause, and I wondered how long I should hold out. "By the way, you two," I suggested, as if the idea had just occurred to me; "had you thought what a fine whacking you'll get, when you get back?"

The Sinner looked at me again, but only sadly. Then followed a search for a match; but there was only one, and it went out. I made no further pretence about matters.

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"Confound it!" I shouted, and remembered to whom I was speaking. "Here, bother it all, you poor little nobodies, come and eat this,—all of it, and hurry!"

I expected a joyful surprise, and the instant disappearance of my sandwiches, but I was mistaken. The Problem looked round eagerly, it is true, but the Sinner did not move. The Problem gazed at him with anxiety. Then he stepped forward quickly,—I believe the Sinner would have fallen; he was very white. Good heavens! thought I, and remembered the brandy. It was very lucky,—but just then the Sinner collapsed altogether, and for the next few minutes I was busy. When I look back on the fifteen seconds or so while the Sinner lay small and white on the grass before me, I believe they were the most miserable of my life. I did not know,—how could I have known?—how little bread had been left for breakfast; how early the boys had turned out of their harbour; how they had been in and out of the water nearly all the morning. But it was only fifteen seconds or so before the Sinner looked up at me, choking a little over the brandy; then his colour came back, and he regarded with interest a sandwich offered by the Problem,

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whose face was aglow with the liveliest affection and happiness. Indeed, he told me afterwards that he had never seen any one faint before ; he thought the Sinner had died very suddenly.

My proposal that we should return to the school was accepted in silence as inevitable. And in silence we returned, except that the Sinner remarked once that it was a cold wind. And mine host being occupied with the *oratio obliqua* and a blackboard, I took the pair of them to the matron, a raw-boned Scotswoman for whom I entertained the most respectful regard, and who, I learnt afterwards, had spied on me through the keyhole as I cut the sandwiches.

“ It will be before sundown that they will be back,” she had remarked to the odd man of the place, who groaned under a basket of boots ; and she watched my direction from the window as he went up-stairs creaking. When she did set eyes on us she had made up her mind, over I don’t know how many pairs of stockings. “ Do not talk to me about it,” she said ; “ ye’ll straight to bed, the pair of ye.” And with an indignant glance at me she marched them up the passage ; but it was she who sent me my luncheon by the boot-boy for all that.

CHAPTER IX

THE next morning there came news that had sent a messenger post-haste to Overdon. I had been awakened more than once during the night by mysterious sounds of comings and goings in the passages outside my room, muttered orders, indistinct questions, scuttering feet ; and twice I thought I heard the voice of mine host's good lady, urgent and agitated. But my tired brain took little heed of it all ; indeed, I doubt if I made more out of it than to recognise a break in the sleep that lay heavy on me after that last night's vigil,—a pleasant invitation to lengthened slumbers ; and I awoke finally from a dream in which I had taken refuge in the cellar from the Publican, who was battering at the door of it with a mahl-stick.

Some one was tapping at the door ; and it was not long before I understood, from the biting Scots of my friend the matron, that the Sinner was ill,—in a raging fever—and latterly

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had been asking for me (though it seemed he knew no one) with such miserable persistency that the doctor had given orders that I should be summoned. It was a short toilet I made, and I learned later that mine hostess supposed I had been dressed already when the message reached me. I was taken by my guide down a passage to a small room disconnected from the boys' dormitories ; the sick-room was the name given to it, as I was told on the way.

The door was ajar. Mine hostess stood by it, her face betraying a motherly concern. She pointed to the smallest of beds in the corner of the room beneath a bay-window ; it seemed they had moved the Sinner to this on his showing signs of feverishness late in the afternoon. The doctor stood in the window, a thermometer or some such instrument poised in his fingers. I went to the side of the bed. The Sinner lay there, his face flushed and his eyes closed, the abandoned attitude of a child's suffering. He was not asleep, as I could tell by his breathing.

"Sinner," said I.

But the Sinner took no notice. He stirred uneasily, and in doing so his hand touched mine for a moment. I know nothing of fevers, nor much of any illness beyond my own of three

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months back, and I had made neither head nor tail of that ; but the burning heat of the child's hand astonished me, and I looked questioningly at the doctor. He nodded, and tapped his thermometer. From his low-voiced conversation with mine hostess it appeared that he thought a crisis of some kind likely in the course of the next twenty-four hours ; what might happen he could scarcely tell ; the fever might leave him, but in these cases, as a rule,—prolonged exposure,—heavy dews,—developments, complications,—impossible to say—hoped for the best—good constitution—bah ! I declare I had heard the identical words a dozen times, all of them.

“ We have sent for his aunt,” explained mine hostess. “ He is an orphan, as I dare say you know. She is a strong-minded, unsympathetic woman, but perhaps really fond of the child. She will be here, if she comes (which is doubtful), by twelve o'clock.”

“ I shall look in later,” put in the doctor. “ Meanwhile,—nothing much to be done,—cooling drinks,—some one he knows to sit with him.” Mine hostess glanced at me. I knew how busy her mornings must be, and nodded ; though I needed no consideration of that kind

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to induce me to stay. Perhaps it was an accident of my lonely, selfish existence, but in some way the fact that the child had all along sought my company unasked,—nay, had come to look upon the companionship as a kind of right—had wrought a curious change in my attitude to the world in general; and between the Sinner and the Problem and myself particularly there existed that unreasoning bond of sympathy which has its basis not in common pursuits and interests, but is born of a confidence impossible of analysis: the trust, the faith—no, but it is the creed of dumb animals and children.

From mine hostess came a grateful look and murmured thanks. She drew me a chair to the bed-head and the doctor followed her to the door. I was left with the matron, whose face wore a forbidding look of disfavour—indeed, I was in doubt how to deal with her. She looked me up and down, and I bore the scrutiny with what grace I might.

“Ye’ll not have had much experience with the sick, I’m thinking,” said she with a preliminary sniff.

I answered that I had been under doctors’ care myself.

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"That I do not doubt," she observed. "With your fondness for sitting in the damp places and like, ye will have caught your colds before now."

She eased the pillow at the Sinner's head and lifted his arm for a moment. In her big bony hand the Sinner's sunburned wrist looked absurdly small and weak. "Ye'll be knowing nothing of the nursing of a child, of course," she said. "Aweel, there's nothing much here. The doctor—eh, but doctors are fules."

I asked her opinion of the case with the deference she evidently expected ; but she was not explicit. "Ye will set at the bedside and ye will give him his drink ; and ye will see that he does not throw the clothes from him ; and if he speaks to ye, ye will know that it is deleerious and as nature means him. There will be nothing in that."

I inquired if the bell communicated with her room.

"I am no more than across the passage," she said. "Ye will ring if ye choose, but it will be no great trouble to ye to step to my room. No but what I should hear ye move."

She busied herself with smoothing the sheets on the bed as she spoke. The Sinner seemed quite unconscious of her presence, and though

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he opened his eyes now and then, only closed them without apparent recognition of anything that was passing. She smoothed the hair gently from his forehead. "Eh, but 'tis hot," she said to herself. I caught sight of the wedding-ring on her finger. "Puir wee soul," she whispered. Her masterful and comprehensive gaze went round the room, and she shifted the barley-water a little nearer to me. "Ye will mind that it is a preevilege," she remarked abruptly.

I assured her that I was grateful to be allowed to do so much.

"Aweel, the child has been speirin' for ye," she said ; and just then the Sinner started up with my name on his lips. I spoke to him, and he looked at me vacantly and lay down again. I settled the clothes about him, the matron regarding me sternly as I did so.

"Have ye had breakfast?" she asked with some fierceness. Truth to tell I had forgotten it. She surveyed the bed critically, tucked in the blankets at the sides, and re-arranged the barley-water. "Ye will sit in the chair," she said ; and she turned with her hand on the door to take a final and jealous scrutiny of the room. She gave some kind of a snort—of

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pleasure or toleration I could not tell—and disappeared. It was not five minutes gone before she returned with a tray containing the breakfast of a giant. She set it on a table in the window and I thanked her ; but she opened the door again, shut it behind her without a word, stepped across to her own room, and returned within the minute to contemplate me with the utmost severity. “And if I did not know ye would be guid to the child I would have seen ye to that London of yours before I would have let ye look at the keyhole of the door of this room,” she said, and was gone so silently that I never heard the catch of the lock.

Thus it was that I gained my first experience of a sick-room without a doctor’s bill to follow. And after all it was no great matter, though I made sure of the use of my bell before I was in any sense at ease ; that is speaking comparatively, for I cannot say I was ever at ease during the three hours I spent there. I think I had never before seen a child suffer ; and the only associations I connected with the Sinner were those of skies and flowers and outdoor growth and activity ; an innocent faun in my new-found Arcadia ; the apotheosis of mischief in a garden of primroses.

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For quite an hour the Sinner lay there tossing uneasily. Now and then he started, stared wildly round the room, and fell back again always without any kind of recognition of my presence. I had some trouble to keep the clothes on him, and that I knew I must do after the caution given me by the Scotswoman, or I think I should have left him as he seemed to wish, and you could see the whole of him longed for the coolness of the air. Yet there was no resistance to any measures I took to obey the Scotswoman's injunctions ; you would not realise, until you sat as I did by the bedside, how small a thing a child is.

And then he began to chatter. One cannot suppose anything more startling to a man untrained as myself than these sudden break-ages of silence,—the causeless inception of speaking after unnatural stillnesses—and above all, the mechanism of it ; there was a machine, and twice in a minute the piston thrust and the wheels ran and there was speech. It was not the Sinner, though he spoke of nothing but the trivialities of the small life he lived ; arithmetic and school-bells and cricket-balls, from one to the other and over again ; and sometimes of my pictures and me, but that was the saddest

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of all, for each time I was hoping the words had their meaning, and each time he reverted to something quite outside my relations with him,—Latin sentences, always Latin sentences, subject and object and predicate and all the unmannerly jargon of school-book grammar. And twice at least there were words indicative of the more serious interviews with mine host,—a sort of comment unspoken till now—and yet I knew the Sinner thought lightly of such matters ; but they were part of his daily life, and so I think found their utterance then. I am sure I should have laughed at the word *Don't* at any other time ; just then, in that connection, I wondered what it had cost him before to suppress it ; not much I dare say, but in that little bed he did not look worth whipping.

Perhaps it was more than could be expected of any man in my position that I should take all this as a matter of course ; “as nature means him,” that was the matron’s expression of it. Indeed, I doubt if it was proposed I should. There was the removal of my breakfast, which broke the spell for a minute or more ; and twice or three times I thought I heard a rustle and the fall of a foot and guessed

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the Scots mother at the keyhole. However that may be, the Sinner was on the point of revealing some mystery connected with one of mine host's last interviews with him (and I was on the tip-toe of expectation, a glass of barley-water in my hand, and I do not know with what other intentions of making matters easy) when there came to me the distant sound of voices, nearer and nearer, up the stair and along the passage, till they ceased at the door of the room.

"You see, sir——" said the Sinner, and his voice was hopeless of reprieve.

Then the door opened softly.

If the Problem had set himself of designed purpose, that first afternoon when I met the Lady of the Lake, to draw me a picture of the Sinner's Aunt as I was to meet her then, he could not have outlined her with an exacter touch. There were the goloshes, the umbrella, the cotton gloves, the spectacles like carriage-lamps on each side of a red-tipped pole of a nose, the wisp of hair under a black bonnet, the thin figure, and the rasping voice. I declare I had known her for years.

She was accompanied by mine hostess, a grave and matronly person. I rose from my

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seat at the bedside as she entered, and found my right hand encumbered with a glass of barley-water, which I was not far off spilling. I was conscious of a prolonged glare from the black-rimmed spectacles. I remember speculating on the possibility of black kid being bound so neatly on the nose-rest,—if that be a correct term, and I am ignorant if it is. Mine hostess introduced me, and the Sinner's Aunt bowed, a sort of snap out of the perpendicular and back again.

"Let me see the child," she said. I made way for her to the bedside, and as I did so, I caught sight of the matron's face behind her; the mouth was thin and forbidding.

The Sinner's Aunt surveyed the fevered little face with severity. She handed me her goloshes and umbrella and bent over the bed. "What did you tell me that doctor said?" she asked abruptly. Mine hostess in her reply happened to mention the word crisis.

"Crisis?" she rapped out in a strident undertone, and sniffed. "Crisis? A cold, nothing more nor less. From the telegram I received this morning I thought the boy was——"

"And ye will be so kind as to remember that this is a sick-room," quoth the matron.

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The Aunt turned upon her, looked her up and down, and snorted. The Sinner tossed fretfully and thrust a hot little foot from under the blankets. The Aunt replaced the clothes somewhat more gently than I expected. Then he chattered out something about butter-cups and the river, and whatever answer the matron would have been given for her interruption was forgotten.

"H'm," said the Sinner's Aunt.

"Ye will see that it is more than a cold," said the matron; "and perhaps it would be better that not so many should stand round the child's bed," she added to mine hostess. "There will be the room yonder, and it is no more than to step the passage."

I suggested this to the Sinner's Aunt. Contrary to my expectation she at once took her goloshes and umbrella, and with a parting glare at the matron made for the door with such speed that my intentions of opening it for her were belated by half the length of the room; before I could do so much as make my way past the little table containing the barley-water she had turned the handle, opened the door, and to my bewildered vision appeared to fall headlong into the passage. There was a resounding

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thump and a muffled cry, and leaving the matron in a state of speechless rage and indignation I darted to the door followed by mine hostess, the latter almost tearful in her perplexity. It was a strange sight that met our eyes.

The Problem was sitting on the floor rubbing his head dismally. Beyond him a confused heap,—I am unable to describe it with particulars—which, as the key turned behind us in the sick-room door, shook itself convulsively, came to a kneeling posture, and at last rose with frantic sweeps at dress and hair and bonnet,—the Sinner's Aunt, voiceless, panting.

She waved me aside and leaned against the wall. Mine hostess opened the door of the matron's room, and she allowed herself to be assisted in. I picked up the Problem and followed them.

"Take him away!" gasped the Aunt. "Take that boy away! Do you hear me? Take him away!"

"He is hurt, I think," I said; and indeed the Problem gazed most mournfully at me.

"What could have happened?" asked mine hostess, busy with a smelling-bottle and a fan.

"Happened? The boy deliberately thrust his body before me as I was leaving the room,

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deliberately threw me to the ground. Take him away!"

"I didn't," murmured the Problem.

"Deliberately threw me to the ground. Take him away!" She was recovering her breath a little. "What were you doing at the door?" she asked severely.

"I was listening, listening at the keyhole."

"Listening at the keyhole! I tell you, take him away!"

"Yes," said the Problem, "I wanted to know how he was."

"A likely story," she sniffed.

"The boys were great friends," I interposed. "This is the one who was so foolish as to run away with your nephew, and he is naturally anxious——"

"Anxious, indeed, he anxious! And is no one else to be anxious, I should like to know? For a great boy like that to be lumbering round a keyhole——"

"At least," I suggested, "he has not benefited greatly by doing so." There was a sorry lump on the boy's forehead, as I turned his head for her inspection.

"H'm," said the Sinner's Aunt, "butter. Take him away."

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I beckoned to him to follow me. In truth I thought I saw an opportunity of doing something which had been in my mind all the morning, and that was to send a note to the Lady of the Lake acquainting her of the way in which matters had fallen out. She would come, I knew, and the thought of it made me for a moment forgetful of the reason. The Problem assented with alacrity; he was just out of school, and could be back before dinner. So I set him off to the lake and returned to mine hostess in the matron's room. I found the Sinner's Aunt in a somewhat more composed frame of mind. She inquired when the doctor would be returning. In about a couple of hours, thought mine hostess, and went on to explain that lunch had been prepared and was waiting. I was invited to accompany them, and on the way managed to slip behind and knock at the bedroom door.

"Is yon body wi' ye?" asked the matron with caution through the crack. "Weel then, ye will tell the mistress there is no deeference in the child's condection. No that to any who has had expeerience it would be expectit. Ye can judge for yersel'," she added, opening the door a thought wider, and I peered in. The Sinner's eyes were not shut, but I do not know

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what he was seeing. And still he chattered of rabbits and algebra and bows and arrows, and I left him, asking permission (it was politic) to return later.

I have little remembrance of what passed at luncheon. The Sinner's Aunt I recollect contemplating the rice-pudding with acrimony and eventually being helped twice to it ; but beyond that, and noticing that she guarded her goloshes under her chair, I think I might have eaten that meal alone. The windows were wide open, and in the sunshine outside a pair of peacocks strutted proud in shot bronze and blue ; clusters of wistaria swayed in the breeze, and there was a merry chase of sparrows after a white butterfly—a flash of forked wings and a swallow had it ; you could hear the snap as he shut his beak. And then the gate swung and a gracious figure came into the framed square of garden. And the Lady of the Lake, my note in her hand, and her eyes grave and kind, crossed the lawn with the peacocks stepping daintily after her.

I think the Sinner's Aunt was glad to see her. But her first action was to gather her umbrella and goloshes, and she stood to shake hands with a yoke of flabby blackness on her

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left wrist. They were but the merest common-places my Lady exchanged with myself; she thanked me for the note I sent her, and perhaps not five minutes were passed before she was away with mine hostess and the Aunt to the sick-room. I followed.

At the door we found the doctor.

"Difficult to know what to make of it," quoth he. I know the matron behind him sniffed. Mine hostess engaged him in a muttered conversation, of which the result was this; that the Sinner's Aunt accompanied her to the drawing-room, the doctor nodded to the matron and was off, and the Lady of the Lake turned to me—not a thought of laughter in lips or eyes. "I am going to sit with him," she said. "If anything should happen,—you understand—I will send for you at once."

I may have replied as I ought, but it was a different ending to my note from that I had pictured. You see I had hoped for so much; and I changed my views about it all before I was down-stairs, and found that I was saying *too much* over and over. My pipe, thought I, and work,—which led only to my pipe.

It was a cloudy day, and no need for the peacocks to foretell rain. Rain was in the air,

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a lull of singing birds, and a darkening of green on the trees. And there was silence in the garden ; hardly a sound but of bumble-bees at the mignonette and roses, and those nodding in a fluctuant warm wind against a sky of grey and purple.

A verandah ran outside mine host's smoking-room. Further along the house-wall I could hear the drone of his class humming through the open windows. I sat in the verandah in a painted garden-chair, possibly for an hour, while the smoke from my pipe curled among the wistaria stems, lifted to the roofing, nestled to the twisted iron, lapped under the eaves and away. There was not a puff of wind ; the stupor of that still garden overtook me, and I sat watching the shifting smoke-wreaths, whitened from grey because of the drab clouds that writhed and grew beyond the hill, sharp edges and reeling globes of vapour. It was hypnotism of a kind, for the live faculties in me were bruised and deadened ; the crash must come, you felt that, and till then there was nothing to do but to wait. But it fitted the time ; sunshine and flowers and birds and bees, six weeks of them, and leading up to this ; cloud and silence, the tension of my string of

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adventures tightened to breaking point, the storm to come,—and after that ?

The dull air split with light ; a knife of light that probed once, twice, and then an oppression of darkness on pained eyeballs. There was a scared cheeping in the ivy, and again silence. Then a crackle, miles beyond the hill, that grew to a roar, rolled and crashed overhead and mumbled sulkily, loth to leave its hold on our hearing. That suited my mood. I longed for the snap of the string, the relief of the strained fibres ; I welcomed each stroke of the knife, keen, white, resistless. There were shock and crash that followed, but sound after silence was the event we were moving to : another flash, and another ; a circular sweep of the blade, nearer volleys, artillery galloping into line, a stifling atmosphere that bound brain and sight and thought.

Some one touched me on the shoulder. It may be I guessed more than the Scotswoman meant to tell me, but as I followed her I knew there was not long to wait. The doctor ? If he were not here by now, no need of him.

The room was altered. In the morning there had been light, air, a patch of blue beyond white-sashed windows, the happy chirping of

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restless sparrows, and the Sinner talking only as he might talk in his sleep. But now I saw a lurid square of sky, a darkened room, my Lady of the Lake at the Sinner's bedside, and mine hostess and the Sinner's Aunt in the corner behind her. And there was the Sinner bolt upright and staring straight before him : chatter, chatter, a gesture of the hand, a shake of the head ; the lightning playing round and round him, cutting queer shadows on the wall ; a question and a strained pause for the answer he never heeded, the voice of my Lady of the Lake, soothing and caressing ; the furious blows of thunder that drowned speech and mocked the intense longing to hear that possessed me.

The blind, thought I, the blind, and shut it out. It was a red one, and halfway down before the Scotswoman could stop me. "Up wi' it," she gestured more than spoke in the din. "We drew it before, and it sent him daft." Lightning through a red blind !

I have never seen a picture such as that. There was a flash that whipped the darkness, flicking a white thong into every corner ; a simultaneous rending above us,—it was a yell, a scream, a shout ; the lightning licked at the Sinner's mouth and eyes like the tongue of a

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snake. His lips were moving, but there came no sound from them. He pointed straight beyond us all, and the black shadow leaped up on the wall, a hand denunciatory, threatening, the hand of a prophet cursing a city. The strangest thoughts ran riot in me; I could formulate no idea but built its theme on the shadow; Jonah and Nineveh, Elijah and Baal—and then a repetition of words, the same again and again.

“Elias was a man subject to like passions as we are, and he prayed earnestly that it might not rain—prayed earnestly that it might not rain—prayed earnestly——”

The Lady of the Lake was kneeling at the bedside. There was a lull in the storm and the room grew darker.

“And he prayed again, and the heavens sent rain—he prayed again——”

The Sinner had stopped chattering and was lying back on the pillows. There was a moment of intensest silence. The room was so dark that it was only by leaning forward I could see that his eyes were open. His breathing was faint and short.

A splash on the window-pane,—another and another,—half-a-dozen. And then came the rain:

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sheets and sheets of rain ; rain that hissed and raced over the tiles, choked the gutters, danced away down to the gravel path to make a little sea there, slashed and tore at the sea till it was the colour of tan, scattered the rose-leaves, spilled the mould of the beds a yard away, and poured in a yellow waterfall down the stone steps to the lawn beyond.

The Lady of the Lake rose and bent over the Sinner. One of his hands lay palm-upward on the counterpane ; it was wet and glistening. The Scotswoman took the wrist, held it a moment, and nodded. I think we were all watching her. "Ye may leave him now," she said to the Sinner's Aunt. The tension had broken with that heavy splash of rain upon the window. The Sinner was fast asleep.

CHAPTER X

I WAS told the next morning that the Sinner slept through the night as we left him. He was not awake at eight, so much I learned from the Problem, an early riser ; but later in the day I made inquiries at the matron's door and the big Scotswoman eyed me kindly.

"Aweel, ye will not do more than look in at the door," she said. "No that the child is in his fever now," she added, "but (with a prodigious sniff) 'tis doctor's orders."

I opened the door softly. My sakes, but here was matter for thought ! The Sinner's Aunt at the bedside, and she was reading,—I guessed Bunyan—it was *The Fairchild Family*.

The Sinner turned quickly, and the Aunt's book closed with a snap.

"Oh," said the Sinner, "why ever didn't you come before ?"

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"One can't be running everywhere after,—good-morning," said I parenthetically to the Gorgon—"after a small boy who——"

"Oh, but we didn't mean—I didn't mean——"

"Who does all sorts of extraordinary things, and then expects—have you been here long?" I asked. The Gorgon had risen and was facing me with a severity impossible to disregard. "Long enough for my liking," was the answer, "and I understood that the doctor had given orders——"

"You see I've had a cold," said the Sinner. "I mayn't read. Will you come and read to me?" *The Fairchild Family* was placed on the table with a subdued bang.

"I've only come for a minute, Sinner. I think I mustn't stop to read. And besides, your Aunt—you see——"

"Yes," said the Sinner.

"Perhaps I shall see you later," I remarked to the Sinner's Aunt. She took not the smallest notice.

I closed the door, and, a sudden idea striking me, made my way to the school-library, a sunny panelled room on the ground-floor. I took up the catalogue, and searched under *F*; *The*

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Fairchild Family was not there, which set me thinking.

But I had a further object in leaving the Sinner abruptly. I knew that the Lady of the Lake had left on the evening before with the intention of coming up from the house in the valley early the next day, and I thought I knew the way she would come. So I betook myself to the verandah and my pipe, and that was pleasing me mightily. My pipe has ever been my truest friend, though you may lose sight of your truest friend for a day or two ; but there are times when through the soft grey smoke-wreaths the world takes colour like a flower in the sun, crimson and purple for duns and drabs ; and here was a time when the storm of yesterday was over and you looked straight ahead into clean skies and clear weather. I suppose I lost myself in the contemplation of it ; for yesterday, as we were leaving the Sinner asleep in that quaint little room, with the lightning dying in the west and the rain helter-skelter at the window, I caught a glance from the Lady of the Lake, and if she read a twentieth part of what I was thinking she must either have been angry or not. At any rate she was to return this morning, and through my pipe-clouds the

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world went alive and rosy. Understand, I was sitting with my back to an open French window. There was a tap on my shoulder. I must have turned with more than mere politeness.

"No, I know you didn't expect me," remarked the Sinner's Aunt.

"I beg your pardon," said I, and immediately saw there was no reason why I should have done so, "I thought you were with the—with your nephew."

"I have been with him since three o'clock," said the Aunt.

"You must be tired," I ventured.

"I am not," replied the Aunt.

"Won't you sit down?" I asked, hoping she would not.

"No," said the Aunt with emphasis. Her voice rose. "No. Why should I sit down? Can you tell me that?"

"I am sure I cannot," I replied.

"Then why did you ask me?" she snapped. "But there, you're like the rest of them. They're all alike. When I came here yesterday, what did I do? Sat in a train for three hours, except when I walked up and down the carriage. I get out of the train and sit in a brougham for half-an-hour. I am met at the door of the

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house and asked to sit down. I sit in that room at the child's bedside for six hours, come downstairs and am asked—to sit down. Well, it's about all some people are fit for, to sit down themselves or to ask some one else to do it." She regarded my deck-chair with meaning.

"I am very sorry," I observed.

"You are not," she rapped out.

"Well then, to tell the truth, I am not," I answered, "not in the least." I was half-angry, half-laughing. Perhaps she was unused to be met with her own weapons ; at any rate a grim smile deepened the lines about her mouth.

"If every man and woman told the truth under all circumstances," said she, "the world would be a very different place."

"It would be very dull," I suggested.

"Dull? It would be about as lively a place as I wish to see. Dull, indeed!"

"Of course. You would never be able to wonder whether your neighbour was saying more than she meant ; or whether she would think you meant more than you said."

"H'm," said the Sinner's Aunt. "Well, it's not likely to be tried, that's one thing."

"It might be tried, for five minutes at a time ; a sort of game, you know."

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"H'm. Why are you sitting here?"

"To smoke, and to think, and to look at the view."

"Bah!" said the Aunt.

"Does that mean the experiment is to be regarded as a failure?"

"Not at all. It would have been a failure, young man, if you had told the truth. As it is, I'll trouble you to accompany me round the garden." There followed business with the goloshes.

"I shall be delighted," said I.

"That is not true either," said the Sinner's Aunt.

It occurred to me to relight my pipe. "You don't object to smoking?" I asked, and was certain I could not have said that ten minutes ago.

"I shall be delighted," said the Sinner's Aunt. There was a convincing snap of elastic bands.

"I believe that is true," said I. But I believe too that my own profession of pleasure in the Gorgon's company was not conventional, for I was beginning to be more than interested in the owner of this rasping tongue and these goloshes. I doubt if I was not a little flattered that she had insisted on my being rude to her.

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We set off up the path in silence, the Sinner's Aunt leading the way. At intervals she stopped and prodded a rose-leaf, or tapped at the stem of a clematis, or whisked aside straggling sweet-peas. The storm had left havoc behind it, and though the red gravel of the paths was swept clean and uneven, and the mould of the garden-beds, parched to cracks last week, was dinted and kneaded into a rich level of blackish-brown, and though the grass steamed in the meadow beyond, and on all sides was that intoxicating smell of earth after rain, still there was a sigh here and there for battered roses, snapped poppy-heads, draggled jessamine; or you stooped for a pansy, and found it splashed and spattered, and your geraniums sodden. But my sighs? Well, I had hoped to have spent part of that morning with the Lady of the Lake, and matters were not setting fair in that direction, I had been thinking.

"Why does that child like you?" she asked.

I suppose I had expected, if I was thinking about the Sinner's Aunt at all, some commonplace in regard to battered geraniums. "Your nephew?" I asked back.

"Of course. Why is it?"

"But children like anybody."

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"They do not," quoth the Sinner's Aunt, and there was nothing more to be said.

We had reached the end of the path, where it led away to the cricket-field and the laurel-walk. Thither went the Aunt, and I at her side, my dreams for the morning fled back to the ivory gate, for the laurel-walk was hidden, and invisible from that side of the house by which the Lady of the Lake must reach it.

"When that boy's mother was dying," said the Sinner's Aunt, "she asked me to take care of him."

"She was your sister?" I asked, for there was silence.

"Of course she was," she snapped. "Who else should she have been?"

"She might have married your brother——"

"She didn't," said the Aunt. "I never had a brother."

"Oh," said I.

"She asked me to educate him," continued the Aunt. "Humph."

"And you said you would?"

"I did not," said the Aunt. "I said I would not." I could think of no answer to that. "And then I did," said the Aunt, and banged

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a wet laurel-leaf with her umbrella, so that the heavy drops fell with a rattle.

We walked on rather faster, till she stopped abruptly. "That child is the image of his father," she said, and went on still faster.

"You knew his father well?" I questioned after a little, for want of something better worth asking.

The Sinner's Aunt made no answer to this. "I told his mother I should never do it," she said.

"But you would have."

"I tell you I should not," she cried fiercely, and cut at the laurels again.

"Did his father die before he was born?"

"Of course he did." The Sinner's Aunt turned and glared at me. "Why am I telling you all this?" she asked.

"I don't know. Please don't tell me anything you would——"

"I shall," said the Aunt. "I told you just now that the child was the image of his father."

"Yes," said I.

"That's the reason." We had arrived at a place where there were no laurels, and the umbrella drilled little round holes in the moss.

"You can understand that, I suppose?"

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"I can," said I. And by a common impulse we turned back down the walk.

"I'm a fool of an old woman, I dare say. I dare say I've got my own notions about bringing children up as they ought to be. I dare say I've a good many ideas in common with Solomon."

"And I also," I interpolated.

She looked sharply at me. "I've done my best to bring that boy up as I thought he ought to be. I'm not talking of expense, I've got nothing to spend my money on ; I'm not one of those idiots who found homes for dogs, and cemeteries for cats, and that sort of nonsense. But I've done what I thought best." I said I had no doubt of it. "I taught him to read and write and cipher, read the Bible to him, taught him his prayers." The umbrella stirred gently in some ribbon-grass. "I taught him everything, trained him up, beat him." Here came a cut at an oak-twigg. "And the end of it all is that the boy hates me,—hates me !"

"No, no," said I.

"I tell you he does. Do you think I can't tell ? When a man is delirious, what does he talk about ? People he thinks about, people he knows. Isn't that true ?"

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"It may be true sometimes."

"And it's the same with children. What did that boy talk about? Rabbits, and knives, and watches, and his cousin, and his schoolfellows, and you."

"But then, how about algebra and Euclid and Latin, and things he hated?"

"Yes, and never about me, never a word about me, not a single word. I didn't ask them, but do you think I didn't know?"

"Perhaps when you were out of the room——"

"Nonsense. Here,—you were in the room three hours with him, they tell me. Did he talk about me once?"

"I was only there three hours. Perhaps the matron——?"

"Bah!" said the Aunt.

"Of course, it's the middle of his school-time. He would naturally think about his everyday life, the things and people he had seen lately."

"Not in the least. When his father was delirious—bah! the boy never said a word about me, because he never thought about me."

A puff of wind shivered in the leaves above

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us, and a little shower of water rained down. The Aunt took no notice. "I brought a book with me to read to him. Of course he thanked me—had to. Do you suppose he liked it?"

I said I had not a doubt about it.

"Not a doubt about it? No. There was none—that was why. What was the first thing he asked you when you came into the room this morning?"

"I don't remember."

"You do. You would not say you didn't if you did not. You know as well as I do that he asked you to read to him. Didn't he?"

"I believe he did."

"And how long do you suppose I had been reading to him? Two hours, off and on. I began as soon as he woke up——"

"Perhaps the book——"

"It was a most interesting book; it was the only book I ever had to read as a child. No," said the Sinner's Aunt, "he didn't like the book, because he didn't like me. He dislikes me, is afraid of me, hates me, thinks me a monster."

Through the trees I caught a glimpse of a white frock and a blue sash.

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"Attend to me, if you please," said the Aunt. "That boy doesn't like me, but he likes other people; and they like him, don't they?"

I said that the Sinner was an object of affection to all he met.

"H'm. You think the boy is worth educating?"

"If my judgment is of any value——"

"It's not," said the Sinner's Aunt; "not when you are looking through the trees every minute—do you think I can't see? Just attend to me, if you please."

"I am all attention," said I.

"Listen to me. I've something to say to you, not about the boy. I've something else to say to you—about the answer you gave me when I asked you why you were sitting in the verandah. Do you remember, young man?"

I acknowledged the fact.

"Well then, I'm going away this morning, and I've seen as much as it is necessary for me to see."

"And that is?"

"I have two cautions to give you, young man. One is,—that's a dangerous young woman."

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"I beg your pardon?"

"And the other is,—you're not the first she's made a fool of."

I bowed, I think. We were standing at the end of the walk, in full view of the house.

"I'll not trouble you to accompany me any further," said the Aunt. "I am returning to the house." She held out her hand stiffly. I bent over it, feeling sorry that I had looked away at the white frock. "Bah!" said the Sinner's Aunt, and stepped majestically towards the house, her skirts held high and her white stockings showing quaintly. But she stopped after maybe a dozen yards. "Come here," she said, turning.

I obeyed her.

"How many pictures do you sell in a year?"

I said that it depended upon the gullibility of the British Public.

"H'm," said the Aunt. "Paint me two, four, half-a-dozen."

"It would give me great pleasure if you——"

"Bosh!" said the Aunt. "Half-a-dozen, large ones."

I murmured something about the probable cost.

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“Don’t bother me with the cost. Send the bill into my lawyer. Don’t send it to me ; if you do I won’t pay it.”

I attempted to express my thanks.

“Bah ! ” said the Sinner’s Aunt.

CHAPTER XI

So it was that Arcadia was re-peopled ; for the Sinner recovered in an extraordinarily short space of time ; much too fast, said the Scotswoman, but that was because she was old-fashioned, and expected, or made believe to expect, a long convalescence, doubting the unlikelihood of a relapse. My own notion of the affair was that she had had no inmate of her sick-room for so long (had not mine hostess boasted of I forget how many weeks clear from so much as a surfeit?) that it was a genuine pleasure to her to fill it, and a sorrow to find it empty again. However that may be, there were not many days past before the Sinner was about and alive in the sun ; there were certain reductions of his work to be made, which left him free at times, when the others were poring over Cæsar and equations, so that I saw more of him alone than before.

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"They're doing Latin prose now," he said to me one morning, with pensive glee.

"Are they, Sinner? Is that a great occasion for joy?"

"Oh well, you see, I hate Latin prose; at least, I don't hate it so much as some things,—Latin sentences, you know."

"But what is the difference between those, if a person with a paint-brush may ask, O Sinner?"

"Oh, they're quite different. You have different marks; and then you have to make a fair copy of sentences, and prose you just take down what the master says."

"I see. But—I mean, what do you have to do yourself that's different? It's putting English into Latin, I suppose?"

"Yes. But you see sentences—well, they're little things, and you have to get them right. And prose,—it's a sort of long thing, and then if you get it wrong you can say you tried,—at least, if you copy it out in good writing."

"You can't copy out sentences in good writing?"

"No. You do them in a book, you see, so you have to go on to the end of the time. And prose you write down on one sheet of paper,

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and then copy it out on another as well as you can. And if you write it well, you know, it doesn't look so bad when you get it back,—unless the master uses one of those red pencils.”

“But then, prose is only a lot of sentences joined together, isn't it?”

“Well, I suppose it is. But you see, sentences are all the same length, and prose, sometimes there's a little sentence, and then one about twelve lines long, and then you put in ablative absolutes.”

“Won't ablative absolutes go into sentences?”

“Yes, but you can't put them into every sentence. Sometimes it ought to be in the nominative. I always get those ones wrong. *Having given the signal*, you know, or *Having promised gifts*. If you put *Gifts having been promised*, you have to do it again.”

“Why, Sinner? It sounds all right.”

“Well, it may be the other way. And then Complements.”

“What are Complements?”

“Oh, they're things—well, there are Subjective Complements and Objective Complements.”

“Good gracious! Do those come in sentences?”

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"Yes. *Cæsar has been informed of the conspiracy*: you have to say *Cæsar has been made more certain about the conspiracy*."

"Is that a difficulty?"

"Yes. You see,—*has been made*—verb. Who has been made? *Cæsar*; therefore *Cæsar* is the subject. *Has been made* what? *More certain*; therefore *more certain* is the object. You do it like that."

"It sounds very complicated. Do these things happen every day?"

"Yes. Then, *There was a man*, you know, or *There is a city*. I never can make that out. There is what? A man; therefore *man* is,—well, you see you can't tell always."

"No, Sinner. And then you have to make a fair copy, I suppose?"

"I do; sentences and verses, at least, not always verses. I don't mind them so much, you know; sometimes verses are rather decent."

"When are they rather decent?"

"Oh, well, when they fit in, and when there isn't an elision, and when you get the Latin right, and you just see how it goes. It's a sort of puzzle. And then there are rhymes."

"Are rhymes different from verses?"

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"Oh yes. Verses are Latin ; rhymes are English. Besides, you make up rhymes. The Problem has made ever so many."

"Has he, Sinner ? What sort of rhymes ?"

"Rhymes about what you do when you find words. Like when you want a word for an end of a hexameter, you see if there's one which is short, long, long."

"Good heavens ! Why ?"

"That's the rhyme. A word which is short, long, long, is a potty peculiar patent. And though you bust, it must come at the end of the verse."

"Why must it ?"

"Well, it says so in the rhyme. I think it's short, long, long, but I can't always remember ; it may be short, short, long. I know there are two shorts or two longs. Then there's a pentameter one."

"What is that ?"

"It's about the last word. It's,—well, I don't remember that one. When you were a boy, did you do verses ?"

"I think so, Sinner ; but it was a long time ago. I think I used to do lyrics. Do you ever do lyrics ?"

"No," said the Sinner ; "we only do verses

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at this school. Were you at a school like this when you were a boy ? ”

“ I’m not sure, Sinner ; it seems different now. When I was a boy, you know——”

“ Oh, do tell me what you did. Were you, —I mean, did you get into rows ? ”

“ I think I did ; I’m not sure. In fact, you see, Sinner, I’m not sure if I ever *was* a boy.”

“ Oh,” said the Sinner.

But one morning the picture I was painting was interrupted in another way, so that I found myself no longer able to attend to so much as the mechanical work of it, much less any hint of colour ; for the Lady of the Lake came into it. And if when the Sinner chattered to me of his childish joys and sorrows, his rabbits and his verses and Latin sentences, I was able to work on undisturbed, and knew that silence in answer to his questions would be understood, yet when my Lady of the Lake had once nodded to me from under that broad-brimmed hat of hers, and there seemed the fiftieth of a chance she might do more, I knew my brushes would be idle and my paper empty for that morning. A nod meant that fiftieth of a chance, and I know I wasted (did I waste ?) more than one morning when I had

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seen her pass up to the school, and wondered should I see her again as she went back.

I was busy with a glimpse of the big school-gate through the beeches. It was a fine breezy day, a clear sky and an east wind, and I meant my picture to show it. The wind was tossing the rooks overhead like corks in a shaken pool, up and back and aslide on the edge of the current ; now and then a wood-pigeon sailed down to the firs beyond in the valley—what a motion that was ! a tremor of outspread pinions, quills flat to the blowing air, and fanned home with a flap and a clatter to the tree-tops. Or it was a starling making for his nest, sideways and steered with a flick of the tail, march and counter-march, a most military display ; as if there were an order,—*halt !* and at once the command *to double* : an outline, wing-feathers grey-brown and transparent ; then the plump body as the muscles closed for the stroke, a flash of the sun on blue and gold hackle-tips, and he was gone swinging away on the left by the chestnuts. Wood-peckers there were too, arrows of green from stem to stem, whistling and laughing at the rain that waited ; and nuthatches, a pair of them, round orange belly and slate-blue above, alert

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on branches that swayed and struck at a neighbour's leaves,—the mightiest of tiny hammer-strokes, and a cheery note that jumped with the rush of wind and hiss of trembling twigs. And above it all the patterned foliage of the beeches, green and dark and chequered in the sun, tracing shadows on the moss below that danced gaily to the lilt of humming greenery,—a very morning of mornings !

And the Lady of the Lake came up the drive to the school with the spirit of the morning in her,—you could see that as she opened the gate. I am sure I counted every yard of that brown gravel before I laid my paint-brush down, and the wind caught it and rolled it headlong into the daisies.

She stood looking at my picture, with her head on one side and her hair blown across her face. “An east wind ?” said she, and nodded at the easel.

“If you will name it that,” said I, watching her.

“Oh, you must not name a picture. Name it, and no need to look at it.”

“No name, and you ensure a spectator ?”

“As you see. But I guessed the meaning ?”

“Whatever you guessed must be the meaning.”

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"That is very nicely expressed," said she, and came for a nearer inspection.

Now I cannot tell what god of mischief twisted the wind awry for me that morning, but certain it is that so soon as the Lady of the Lake was in the grip of that yard of paper, there was a puff of breeze that sent it, easel and all,—I had thought it fairly planted and my picture secured to the wood—on to her white flannel skirt, my greens a-smudge, and her skirt streaked and blotched sadly. No use to stare at mishap like that ; your business was done, and the best to make of it.

"Oh, I am sorry," she cried, with the lightest emphasis in the world. She picked up my painting and gazed at it ruefully, and I at her skirt.

"The mischief is done," said I.

"Sponging would spoil it, I suppose ?"

"I'm afraid so. I'm afraid the damage is irretrievable."

"It is a great pity ; those greens were so strong."

"And wet."

"Of course ; otherwise it would have made no difference."

"Flannel is so difficult to deal with."

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"Flannel?" She broke into a merry laugh. Then she caught the direction of my glance. "That? Why, I was thinking of your picture."

"The picture is not worth a thought." It was not, in the condition it left the grass; but little I cared for the picture just then. "If you were into the house quickly——"

"Are you so anxious for that?" nodded she. The wind quickened to a roar in the bending trees above us, and what she made of my answer I could not see, for she turned away to face the blowing, and I stood hesitant.

"Good-bye,"—she was facing me again—"good-bye." She took a dozen steps, with the wind a wild anthem in the beech-leaves, so that my word passed as if never spoken, and then she stopped. A gust caught her hat, and the lithest motion of her hand replaced it. "I came to see that small cousin of mine," she said. "It occurs to me he is probably doing sums, as he's not with you. Is that so?"

"I believe it is. He will be out in a quarter of an hour, or less."

"A quarter of an hour! Dear me, what a long time! What shall I do for a quarter of an hour?"

"It is not so very many minutes." I thought

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she took a half-step towards me. "Minutes go quickly," said I, handling my picture with uncertainty.

"A quarter of an hour," said she pensively.

"If you were to wait here——"

"Oh, if I were to wait here—but my dress," she interrupted. "I was to be into the house quickly——"

"I thought——"

"And you were right ; flannel is so difficult to deal with." At that she set off again, the breeze puckering the folds she touched. "There's something I want to tell you," she called, twenty yards away.

I set down my easel, and took perhaps five steps towards her, when she turned away again.

"It's not flannel," she said over her shoulder, and was into the house.

But she was to return that way, thought I ; and I set to work to see if there was anything would set to rights my blur of greens and browns,—though I believe that just then I liked the blur better than what I had meant to make of it.

And when she did return ! My eyes had been on the paper and off again to the doorway twice a minute, and then,—the door opened and

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she came out, followed by the Other Man and (of all people in the world) the Chief Butler. They set out in my direction, one on each side of her. Now it is a queer business, but I had never, for some reason or other, associated the Lady of the Lake even distantly with either of these men, and yet, had I chosen to think about it, they had had as many opportunities at least as I of meeting her ; indeed know her they must, since mine host was known to everybody, and it was unlikely that they were kept in the background. Why, and the Chief Butler,—I declare, he was talking to her as he might to one of his school-boys.

“You two seem to have been making a pretty mess of things between you,” he rapped out confidently enough. “I shouldn’t have thought painting was much of a game this weather. Wind blow the cobwebs away, eh? Inspiration in the breeze?”

The Lady of the Lake glanced at him, and laughed. I could not see the Other Man’s face, but I knew he was not pleased. And I was in a dumb rage. You two, indeed!

“It’s an ill wind that blows nobody any good,” said the Lady of the Lake mischievously, regarding her skirts. “Here I come on a

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message of mercy to a small ragamuffin, and I'm escorted back by three real grown-up—by the way, which of you is escorting me?" she asked suddenly.

The Other Man looked up quickly. I had started to my feet, but the Chief Butler anticipated us both. "Allow me," he said, with a hideous scrape.

The Lady of the Lake held out her hand to the Other Man, and then to me. She may have seen what I was thinking, for her eyes were dancing. "Does the wind often upset you?" she asked. And she turned to join the Chief Butler, who was standing expectant.

I must have stood watching them for longer than I meant, for I was suddenly recalled to the fact of the Other Man's presence. "Isn't he delightful?" he remarked. But he also was watching them; and after a minute he laughed shortly, and, lighting a pipe, strolled away to the house.

CHAPTER XII

FROM a certain position on a side of the broad drive that led to the school I was wont to amuse myself, as one who finds diversion easily in small matters, by watching those who came and went to the house, calling on mine host and his lady. He was a man given to hospitality, and his lady dearly loved the clatter of her tea-cups, so that not many an afternoon passed but one heard the click of horse-hoofs and the fluent roll of carriage-wheels on gravel. And then behind my clump of lilacs (I was faithful to that long after the big clusters browned and fell) I would watch and wonder over the portly dames among their cushions, and find myself figuring out history and incomes, and much that was their affair and none of mine. I never met them; for if there is a single task that comes difficult to me, it is to sit with a tiny brew of scalding tea, and listen to small-talk about the neighbours of other people.

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Now these were the inhabitants of the larger country-houses round about. But one day, when the term was nearing its end, there came a visitor who did not belong to this category ; that you could see at a distance even. She walked differently, for one thing ; and there was I do not know what in her dress and the trimming of her hat and a spotted veil she wore that made me wonder what might be her business. There was nothing of the parent about her, nor much to show that she was at ease with her surroundings, and she kicked her skirts in a way, as I have hinted.

However, all this was nothing to do with me after all, when suddenly she caught sight of us ; she had been glancing doubtfully about her before that. " You have made a mistake, my friend," I was thinking. " This is a house for ladies of a certain,—how shall I put it not to offend you ? And you are more at home in a pushing thoroughfare or a crowded supper-room, than among these poppies and with that old house staring at you and your feathers." That was my thought ; but she came forward then over the wet grass (it had been raining) picking her way on high heels, with a fine eye for the drier spots, for all the world as if she

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were crossing a London street in December. I noticed her instinctive glance to right and left as she touched the grass, as if there were omnibuses in these parts.

She stopped opposite us and spun her parasol behind her hat, so that the shot silk changed and glowed from bright to dark. Altogether the picture is crude colouring, thought I; but the Problem and the Sinner stared at her in a kind of fascination, watching the twirl of the red parasol.

“Is this the school?” she asked.

Now mine host and his lady, and the two masters with them, were away this afternoon to a neighbouring garden-party, and the boys were left to play what games they chose alone; a plan at times purposely adopted by their dominie, who would boast that they behaved as orderly in his absence as not, and thanked Heaven he was turning no milksops out into the world, but rather those who had learned the meaning of independence. Thus to welcome this city-cat, as I guessed her, there was nobody half so old as she but I, and I was wondering what she wanted.

“Yes,” said the two boys together, and I saw the Sinner take a half-step forward, his eyes

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still on the moving silk. I explained mine host's absence, and inquired if she wished to see him. To which she replied by asking when would he be back. That much I did not know, but not for two hours or more, I thought. "You're the drawing-master, perhaps?" she went on.

Now may I never earn a twopenny-bit, but it was hard to answer that politely. However, I did reply as quickly as might be that I was not, and that both the masters were with mine host at the party, if she wished to see them. I saw by her eyes that she only just prevented herself from smiling, because I had asked her twice what she wanted, and she had only given me questions back again.

"And you're two of the boys?"

"Yes," said the Sinner promptly. The Problem looked doubtfully at me, but I was busy with my palette, and perhaps she saw my meaning. For she threw me another glance and addressed herself to the Sinner. It was a kind of challenge, and I began to hum an opera-air, and checked myself as if I suddenly remembered her presence. She gave a quick little laugh, and tilted the Sinner's straw hat a wee bit backwards, looking at him.

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"I suppose I shall have to wait?" she said. "Would one of you boys like to show me somewhere to sit down?"

There was a garden-seat not twenty yards distant. The Sinner half-turned, and she followed his eyes. "Thanks," she said, and picked her way to it admirably. When she came there, she turned, sat down, leaned back, and regarded us with half-shut eyes and twitching lips. She knew that she had come into my picture.

The two boys stood by my side. I fancy that the Problem guessed a little of what I was thinking, for I took out my watch and glanced at the sun, and he looked at her and then at my picture. But the Sinner seemed unable to take his eyes off the indolent figure on the garden-seat, and stood awhile thinking.

"I know," he said, and walked rapidly towards her.

"Ah, I thought you would come," she said, and he flushed with pleasure.

"Would you like us to show you over the school?" he asked. "It might pass the time while you are waiting."

She looked at him attentively for a minute or two. Then something in the idea seemed

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to please her vastly, for she began laughing. "Capital!" she said. "Capital!"

The Problem stood hesitant. "Does he mean me to go?" he asked. But I was annoyed with the Sinner, for I meant this patch-of-paint to find her place again, or tell me her business, and I did not answer him. I was still angry, too, at her guessing me for a drawing-master, though why I could scarcely tell, for once I might have been one, after all. Perhaps she had run a thread of pity into her tone, as who should say, poor countrified struggler! Though a painter may see more of her likes than most men, for that matter; and I fancy she knew that when I gave her my answer to the question. We understood each other then, and that was why I was vexed with the Sinner. The Problem gazed with a puzzled expression at them; but seeing that they were moving off, he spoke again. "I wonder why he likes her so," he said. "She looks like a great parrot, in all that red and green."

Still I did not answer him, and he followed them slowly. However, it was not only that I was vexed with the Sinner at losing my battle for me, which kept me silent. A thought had come which hit me and hit again, as you may

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say. This bat of the streets had not hired herself a cab out here and dismissed it at the lodge to call on mine host for business connected with the school ; she would have driven that to the door. For whom, then, had she come ? For some one at the school, that I felt certain, and belonging to the men-folk, too ; such as she did not dress for women. There were but two men then, beside mine most, and he, good soul, —well, his face was in my memory. The Chief Butler ? But I thought of his black leather book ; he was out of the question. And then my mind was made up. Through the trees I could see the Sinner walking slowly, and a red parasol that caught the falling sunlight, and tossed it hither and thither ; and I made no doubt that what mine host had to show in his chapel and dining-hall and gymnasium and dormitories would be exhibited with all the pride a school-boy possesses for the gods of the household. I saw them pause at the old ivied arch that stood over the big iron gates, and the Sinner waving a small arm to the yellow lichened escutcheon on the keystone. Much she would make of that !

It would take a full hour's walking to the party. The time was too long, and I determined

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to see what could be done for a conveyance. The two fat roans of mine host's stables I well knew to have been set in the phaeton-shafts three hours ago. True, there was a ragged pony wild in the meadow, and a cart it once fitted in the coach-house ; yet, even had I possessed the knowledge to catch and harness the animal, I could not have carried off anything belonging to the establishment ; for I needed to be secret about this business, and could not afford that even the stable-men should know I was abroad, or likely to be anywhere but in the neighbourhood laying brush to paper. I hit eventually upon the notion of applying to a butcher-friend of mine in the village, a man in a pretty way of business so far as butchering went, and also the proprietor of a tiny house licensed for beer and spirits, much of which, I made no doubt, took its way down his own big throat, for he was a full-blooded old fellow, sixty years or thereabouts, and a man of stature more than filling his easy seat in the bar-parlour. His sister kept house for him, and though she poured out his glasses at a word, would do so with a queer twitch of contempt on her lips, and set all on his table without a glance at his face, which, had she seen it, was a curious mixture of

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amusement and deprecation. But he was a rare money-getter, as she told me, and after all had sixty years behind him, and the following of half the village, who dearly loved a big man and, in their hearts, a big drinker, though that much they would not have admitted to their wives, I suspect. He drove a weedy ewe-necked mare in a rough market-cart, and I meant him to take me near enough to the house I wanted for me to walk the rest of the way, and then I was to plead a change of mind, or a fit of laziness, or any like reason for my presence ; for I had excused myself to mine host on the score of work, and laziness was an easy explanation. So I left my easel standing and sought out my friend, and asked if he were driving the way I wished ; he knew that this meant talking, which of all things he loved, and thrust out his under lip to answer me.

“ Well,” said he, with a rare long sniff, as if considering the matter, “ that might be my direction, so to speak.” He made his rounds for orders and market-business, as I knew, about four in the afternoon. “ I’ll not say it wouldn’t be out of my way, if it was to-morrow,” he added. And he rapped on the bar-partition with a wink at me.

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His sister entered. She was a strapping dame of fifty, there or abouts, with white hair and a cook's cheeks. She had no weakness for me, as I well knew, for within a fortnight of meeting her brother I had drawn his picture, not a portrait, but more of a caricature it was, and he had held it out to her with a dubious chuckle, and turned his back to show it was none of his doing. And she glanced at it, flounced from the room, and was back again, her voice trembling as she spoke to me.

"I've put it behind the fire," cried she. "I wouldn't have believed it—no. And you an artist, calling yourself indeed!" By this she had worked herself into tears. "Why, one of our school-boys could have done it better nor that. Behind the fire I put it, and I'll thank you——" An apron choked what more was coming. Now all that was a very unhappy predicament for me to have been in.

To-day, as whenever she clapped eyes on me, her greeting was tempered by the coldest politeness. "Good-afternoon," said I, and "Good-afternoon," she gave me back again, with a whisk of her cloth round a shining pewter, and a clatter of that on the shelf. She was not best pleased with her brother, that I was clinking

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glasses with him ; but there, it was but by way of business, and she should have recognised his oceanic capabilities more openly. Yet even this amused me ; for though she would have died sooner than confess so much as to tolerance of his behaviour, I believe that she would have staked her year's savings on her brother to drink any other pair of men under the table.

She placed a paper before him, a list of houses for him to visit. "Be sure you make certain of *that*," she said, marking with her nail a particular address. "So stupid as they are there, I've two minds to go with you myself."

"As you please, my dear, as you please," he answered ; and I half-rose, thinking I must walk after all.

"And who would look to the bar?" she asked scornfully. "No, I'm needed here, at any rate. Would the gentleman be going with you, perhaps?" Truly, these were hints of a fair quality.

"'Tis no grand temptation to him, I'd say," he answered ; and she stepped forward to a customer for porter.

He winked at me again, and nodded to the door. I heard the tramp of a pair of heavy-booted village loons and the hiss of beer in the

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jug as I escaped. In a minute he had followed me to the stable.

"I thought I should have to walk it," I said.

"Ah!" said he contemplatively. "And perhaps you would have, if she'd thought you meant coming. She's a good woman, my sister, a good woman," he added. "I've seen many women in my day, many women." This much I had gathered from previous conversations. "But she's a good woman," he said again, meditating on her.

"At least," I said, "she has not much opinion of me." And he fell to fastening the traces with a chuckle.

It was a cart with a kind of a plank fastened across the middle as a seat, that had no back to it ; so that there was not much comfort to be had out of a four-mile drive, although the lanky rat-tailed mare put her best leg foremost, and jolted us up and down the hills pricking her ears forward and back again as her master called to her. He, too, was lavish in recollections of younger days, when he kept a pair of greyhounds which were the envy of half the countryside ; for he loved to talk about this, as I knew, and

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though I am little versed in such matters, and could no more tell the points of a whippet than I could class a pigeon, still I let him ramble on, being pleased enough to listen and to strike in as suited me.

“There was news brought me,” so his reminiscences ran, “that a hare was in the cabbages at the Grange. Now that was in a walled kitchen-garden with a wooden gate, and the Squire’s gardener, he sent to me to know would I like a bit of sport with my pair o’ dogs. And them I held in leash trying to make out where she squatted, but I could not, and after a bit I sent them ahead to look for themselves. Sure enough in about a couple of minutes up she got, doubled in some raspberry canes, and came down the path to me as straight as she could nose, but looking this way an’ that as a hare will, for the door was shut and what was she to do? And behind her by thirty yards, I’d say, for ’twas a big garden, was Pretender moving like an arrow and a snake—and if you’ve seen a good dog move you’ll know what I mean, ay, and he was a mover. What did I do? Lord keep us, but I couldn’t help myself! For I was standing by the gate, and as she

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come, thinks I to myself, 'Puss 'll be saying 'tis not fair, and her in a walled garden, and me not knowing it unless maybe told about her.' So I just steps to the gate where I was standing, and open it to her as polite as to my lady, and I takes off my hat and bows (and there the gardener stood staring), and 'Good luck to ye,' says I, 'Mistress Puss, and keep out o' the cabbages in future,' and I shuts the door quick in 'Tender's face ; not but what he nearly had his nose through, and could hardly pull up in time to save himself, and as it was, he sputtered gravel all over me with the way on him. There, and he twisted round beautiful, same as if she had doubled, throwing himself along the side wall to get the pace off. If he had not known me ! But he whined, an' I never heard him whine so but once before, an' that was when Fallowfield broke his leg, he having hunted with him since they were puppies."

That was the last story he told me, for at the end of it we pulled up fifty yards short of the big gate, and I got down, thanking the old fellow for a pleasant drive and pleasant company. But his story had set me thinking too, and do what I would, I could not help fitting the hunted hare into the shoes of the man I was coming to

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look for, and as for the hound,—well, I misdoubted much if there would be any to shut the gate in her face. And I wondered how the Sinner's acquaintance with that lady had prospered.

CHAPTER XIII

I WALKED up the lime-avenue that led to the house with some misgivings. Not, in a way, that I doubted my reasons for coming ; for I cannot tell how it was, but the thought that the Other Man would be harmed by this sudden descent from a gas-lit city sat heavy and cold on me. I began to reason out the oddness of the man ; his indifference to his surroundings ; the half-conscientious, half-perfunctory manner in which he carried out his duties ; the natural brilliance of him, dulled and buried in this country-side of cream and beef and apples, a noticeable distinction in his dress and bearing ; the strange answer he made me when I asked him, after a particular occasion when he openly defeated the Chief Butler in a duel of words, why he did not turn his talents to better account. Indeed, I began to see, or rather guess at, a reason for all this. There was something in

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his past life (of which, be it said, with the exception of certain dealings with his tutors, he never uttered a syllable,) that we did not know, something to pass over in silence, to forget, to laugh at ; for do not we that are wise laugh at most melancholy things ? The man was hiding.

That was a delightful garden. In front of the house stretched a large lawn, smooth as a floor and just mown, of the shortest finest grass, and never a plantain to be seen. All round it went a broad path of orange-coloured gravel, and on three sides a wild border backed by a wall. I know nothing more beautiful than masses of roses on a wall, and there they grew as they grow in the Beast's garden in the old fairy tale : Maréchal Niel roses of the softest tints of yellow, Gloire de Dijons, and a profusion of small white and red Ramblers ; and beneath them irises and peonies of a certain Dorian majesty, little plaster roses, and love-in-a-maze and arbutus, monkshood and nasturtium and sweet-peas, than which no flower calls summer to me more quickly,—unless maybe it is the dog-rose, but I love them both for that reason. And behind towered chestnut and elm and sycamore, dark green against an amethystine

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sky. The man who planted that border knew his business. In Nature we are led to expect dull harmonies and minor thirds of colour, hues and shades of browns and greys and greens ; if here and there a carpet of blue-bells or daffodils, yet these are but spring-dresses of light stuffs, and we search in vain for heavier glories. But a garden must be trim, mown, cultivated, and if cultivated, then artificial ; and if that, why then, mass your colours, yellow and red and purple, the strength of jewels and the lees of wine, pour them in profusion over the walls, heap them high in the borders ; the brighter your picture, the truer garden for you. Such at least is my notion ; if duller effects please you, what need to call it a garden ?

A lawn sloped up behind the house, and in this was cut a space for a pair of tennis-courts. There I set eyes on mine host and threaded my way to him to explain my presence as best I might. He was talking to the Bishop's wife, an imposing lady in black silk, the sister of a Cabinet Minister from whom she borrowed some of her features.

I should have spoken to him then, had it not been for this person, for his broad back was turned to me, and she was facing me ; and as

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she looked at me she raised a double eye-glass and surveyed me coolly and critically. And the surprise on her face became so marked that instinctively I glanced at myself, in a mental looking-glass as it were. Heavens, I was in my work-day painter's clothes ! I had entirely forgotten the requirements of a country garden-party. My silk hat was in London, and my frock-coat and other appurtenances of society with it ! This, then, explained the odd half-looks and glances I had encountered on my way across the lawn. However, thought I, if such be the reception I am likely to meet with because of the lack of a black coat and a silk hat, then I was done with the necessity of an introduction to the lady of the house. For which be thankful, I reflected, your mission is easier ; and I slipped away to a seat I noticed, which commanded a view of the situation without asserting an undue prominence for the onlooker.

The Other Man was nowhere to be seen as I sat down, but I saw instead the pleasantest picture of an old hunting-squire that I am likely ever to set eyes on. He wore a black frock-coat, a high white waistcoat, surmounted by a white choker, the quaintest long black boots

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that shone again, and trousers of a mighty black and white chessboard pattern, with spats and a white hat, and under that the cheeriest, ruddiest face, clean shaven and wrinkled, that ever smiled on the work of a pair of pointers. I could fancy him tall-hatted and begaitered, toppling down his cock-pheasants with an old muzzle-loader. He was the apotheosis of a sporting print.

Suddenly I saw the Other Man crossing the terrace behind my old squire ; and I fancy I stood up, or beckoned in some way, for he caught sight of me and threaded his way over. "Why," he cried, "I thought we were to leave you working with those two scamps of yours?"

"I was lazy," I answered ; "and now, when I do come here, I find I have forgotten to dress properly."

I suppose he was accustomed to my work-day appearance (though he was an absent-minded man at all times), for he looked at me, realised me out of harmony with my surroundings, and laughed. Then something seemed to puzzle him. "But you did not walk over?"

"Oh yes," said I,—there were strangers passing.

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"Look at your boots," he said ; "the roads are clay and puddles. You are like the boy with his little axe,—you cannot tell a lie."

At which it occurred to me that I should make but a blundering detective. Polished boots and these roads !

"But what was the need for—prevarication ?" he went on.

"The nature of my conveyance," I answered ; "a butcher's cart."

"Just a passing fancy ?"

"No,—an object I had."

"She's not here, if you mean that," he began. "Did you expect to see her ?" So he had guessed that much ; yet unless he himself had had some such idea in coming, would he have jumped to that conclusion.

"But I wanted to see you," I said. At first he thought of an accident to one of the boys, a stray cricket-ball, a knife, a fall from a tree. "There was a caller," I continued ; "she wanted to see one of the masters."

I did not think how else to put it. The man looked at me quickly ; then he fell to digging holes in the grass with his stick.

"Thank God !" he said at last. "That is to say, garden-parties are convenient things to

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happen when it is unnecessary for every one to be at home."

"You see, I fancy she meant to wait," I went on.

"We will go ; or at least—will you come ? You don't care for this kind of thing ?" He waved his hand comprehensively.

"If I could help——"

"Ah !" said he.

We took a back way to the drive. It would be easy to make excuses afterwards, a July sun, school-duty. "That is the pity of it,—it can't be helped," he added, absently. And we walked a mile without another word.

Presently I pulled up to light a cigarette ; I have noticed that a stoppage will break the severest silence. Yet I was not over curious to know the history of all this, strange (for me) to say ; I thought I could guess most of it.

"What about the boys ?" he asked abruptly.

"Well, two of them were showing her over the school. One was delighted with—your friend." The word seemed to touch some spring in him.

"My friend ?" he burst out with extraordinary bitterness. "My friend ?" He began to speak rapidly and unevenly. "Do you

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know that I am the most,—do you know what it is to be as unhappy as I am? Do you know what it is to go to bed,—to make one's self sleepy with whiskey—and try to forget it all, and in the morning to wake up and find it still there, the fear and the misery? To go through every day, hour by hour, only waiting for the next day, afraid of,—afraid of something you have no power to prevent? To look back on months that you might have spent happily, if you didn't know that this might happen any moment,—that any moment you might be dragged back,—away from all that makes life worth living? Do you know what that means?"

"But surely, an ordinary woman——"

"An ordinary woman! Do you know who that—is?"

"A young man's mistake——" I tried to form the stereotyped sophistry.

"A young man's mistake? Yes,—a mistake. She is my wife,—that's all."

No, I had not guessed that, and could make no rejoinder.

"Tell me, what did you think it was?" he asked, when we had walked in silence for some minutes.

"I'm sorry," said I.

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"Blackmail?" asked he bitterly.

I could only nod. "I am sorry," I said.

"There's no need," he answered. "It was blackmail,—until I married her. It is blackmail now,—except that she wants something different. Before it was only money."

"She was not content with that?"

He shook his head. "It's a curious thing for an assistant-master to confess to," he said, meditatively. "You would hardly guess it, what I'm going to tell you."

"Is that not all?" I asked in some surprise.

He laughed. "Would you have guessed I was a rich man?"

So that was the reason. She wanted position; and she had found out his hiding-place, and meant to get what she wanted. Still I did not understand——

"You see, it was this way. I married her when I was poor, comparatively speaking. I did that to save my mother from hearing about it; she said she only wanted to be married. And then my mother died, and my uncle left me his money,—that was nearly a year ago. There was no need for me to keep on school-mastering; but this is an out-of-the-way place, and I meant to stay here until I had found out

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one or two things. I didn't know where she was, for one ; she had promised to keep away if I married her. You see, she could gain nothing by publicity then ; but she must have found out about my uncle, and now,—well, it's all over now."

Just then we came in sight of the valley and the lake. The sun was gold on the water, and the red-brick house stood above it like a sentinel.

"Then you stayed here to find out your position,—was that the reason?" I asked. He was staring out over the valley, and then he pointed to the lake. A little punt pushed out from the greenery, and rippled the gold water. The Other Man stood looking at it ; but he said nothing. After a little while he turned abruptly. "Come," he said ; "we shall be too late after all."

We were nearly at the school-gates when he stopped again. "If only they need not know yet ! If only I could have got to the end of this term !"

"Would that help you ?"

"I was going to leave at midsummer. Then I could make her an allowance, and travel, or something."

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The man seemed to be gathering himself together before going in at the gates. I did not like to hurry him ; but we had not walked fast, and I knew the time the carriage was expected back again. "All I want is for no one to know,—no one to know——" At that moment two stout roans drew a phaeton slowly round the corner of the road, perhaps five hundred yards away. "That settles it," he said, and walked up the drive.

But we had not gone as far as the corner before there was the wave of a straw hat in the plantation, and the Sinner and the Problem came on to the gravel, breathless. They pulled up on seeing the Other Man.

"Well?" said I, and turned down the side-path with them. The Other Man walked on, looking keenly ahead.

"She's gone," they cried ; and the Other Man came after us to borrow a match.

"Who has gone?" asked I, producing my match-box.

"Why, the lady,"—the Other Man's pipe would not light—"the lady who asked us to show her over the school."

"A prospective parent," said I to the Other Man. He nodded, but he borrowed another

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match. "When did she go, small scoundrel?" This to the Sinner, who had edged close to me; he stood somewhat in awe of my companion, as I knew.

"Oh, a long time ago. We showed her over the school, and she asked a lot of questions, and we answered them."

"You answered them," corrected the Problem; "she only asked me one question."

"And what was that?"

"Oh, it was whether you and the masters were great friends. I said yes, of course. But she didn't speak to me much," he added reflectively. "She liked him, because she said he was like a boy she used to know."

"Oh yes, and she told me a story," went on the Sinner, "rather a stupid one I thought. It was about a girl, who had a brother she was awfully fond of, and he was much younger than she was, and whenever she was going to do anything she ought not to, she used to think of him, and then she didn't do it. Only soon he died, and then she forgot about him."

He stopped. "Well?" said I.

"Well, I asked her if that was the end, and she said no, it wasn't quite the end. So I said, 'What is the end?' and she said I had better

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ask you. And then she said she thought she had better go."

"The end seems to have been that she went away. Did she say whether she was coming again?"

"Oh, I asked her, and she said no, she didn't think so. She thought the place was too sunny; the sun made her eyes water, I think."

"H'm," said I, and turned to the Other Man with an eye to the welfare of my few remaining matches; but he had taken from the Sinner's hands a bat which lacked the string of the handle. "Like me to re-string this for you?" he asked. And the Sinner thanked him with much joy and a little astonishment.

CHAPTER XIV

THE Lady of the Lake was standing behind me, and I was putting the finishing touches to a study of birch-trees.

"A week more to-day," said I.

"And then?" she asked.

"And then, good-bye to this," I answered, tapping my easel.

"Only to that?"

"And to the Chief Butler, of course."

"To whom—the Chief Butler?"

"I forgot," said I. "It is a name of my own for one of the masters."

She laughed. "I see : mutton-chop whiskers and the rest of him pepper-and-salt, and a hint of a cellar-key seldom used."

"Don't you think it fits him—the name?"

She laughed again—low and merrily. "He reminds me—I don't know why—of the Army and Navy Stores, and the suburbs, Blackheath

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and Beckenham and Bickley. Oh, yes,—and vestry meetings in Kensington—and funerals at Highgate,—and meat-teas, and dinner at two on Sundays, and everything that's respectable."

"I have often wished," said I, "to be respectable."

"Artists never are, are they? I mean, they are unpunctual, and they have their meals at odd times, and they wear old coats, and they smoke the most horrible pipes."

"Now that," I said, "is unfair. I admit the unpunctuality,—punctuality is the politeness of people with appetites—and the old coat,—because tailors are punctual, and impolite for that matter. But the pipe,—when for three hours I haven't——"

"And it isn't respectable to make hints either."

"You couldn't call that a hint; it was a dying request."

"Were you choosing between the pipe and me?" she asked innocently.

"And it isn't respectable to make hints, either," I quoted.

"Quick!" she said, and stamped her foot.

"A dying request to the Queen," I suggested.

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"That is better. Her Majesty deigns to grant it. It is permitted to you and your descendants to smoke in her presence for ever."

"I am your Majesty's most obedient and grateful servant ;" and I took out my pouch and well-loved briar-root.

"Can any one fill a pipe?" she asked with humility.

"Probably not, your Majesty. By the favour of the gods, I myself am able on occasion to do so."

"Give it to me," she cried imperiously, and I gave it. She removed my carefully packed tobacco with some small trinket of a knife that hung on her chatelaine. "Now the pouch. Why, it smells of hay."

"It tastes," I observed, "of heaven."

"And for that you must have patience." There followed certain structural proceedings, and then she handed me a pipe filled to the brim,—a solid wedge, a kind of masonry of tobacco.

"Your pardon," said I, and out with my knife.

"If you dare to touch it I shall go away instantly."

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"It would seem I have no choice ;" and I handed it back to her. There followed a process of dissection, and it came back to me a wisp of stringy leaf, a libel on an ill-made cigarette. I surveyed it with misgiving. "Is it permitted," I asked, "to make any alteration in this?"

"Certainly not," she replied.

"In that case," I said, and replaced it in my pocket.

"Why do you do that?" she asked.

"Should I condemn to be burned the handiwork of a queen?" I could not see how she took that. "Especially of an angry queen," I ventured.

To this there was no reply. I glanced round, and saw her biting her lips ; her eyes were lowered and she tapped the ground with the point of her shoe. Then there stole the lightest hint of a smile into the corners of her mouth : I turned quickly, so that she did not know I had seen ; but I did not expect what was coming.

"There is a limit to the—the things I allow to be said to me ; and that, I think, a little overstepped it."

At the which I rose. "I am rebuked," I

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said, and began slowly to replace my brushes, with an idea of returning to the school.

"You need not trouble," she said, "I am going;" and she left me without another word.

I watched her white dress and blue sash till it was hidden among the trees, and I cursed myself for what I had said. I had overstepped the limit,—I had presumed on too near a footing,—nay, almost on an equality. An equality! And yet I had seen her smile. With that thought I took up my brush again, and darkened a shade or so on my birch-trees; not much more, but sat biting the end of the brush and staring out into the sky beyond the trees, where a kestrel wheeled and hovered.

"Does the Chief Butler smoke?" questioned a voice at my elbow.

I started; the Lady of the Lake stood behind me, her hand on the branch of an ash, her mouth all seriousness and her eyes all smiles. I believe I rose and murmured something born of surprise and confusion. There lay, a yard or so to the right, the stump of a large beech, dry and warm in the sun. The Lady of the Lake seated herself on it demurely, and looked up at me from under the broad brim of her hat. "You haven't answered my question," she said.

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"The answer would be easily ascertained——"

"I asked you to give it me," she said.

"By a simple experiment," I continued.

The Lady of the Lake raised her eyebrows and turned her head with an air of petulance. She propped her chin on her hand and gazed out over the lake, and the wind touched her hair gently.

"You might fill a pipe for him; and if he lighted it, you would know he was not a smoker."

I think there was the tiniest smile; but apparently she had not heard.

"What do you call the other man?"

"The Other Man," said I.

"For want of a better name?"

"For want of a worse."

Still she set her eyes on the rim of hills beyond the lake. "And what do you call me?"

"I do not believe," said I, "that I ever call you anything."

She seemed lost in thought, and I busied myself with arranging my brushes. The sun told me the morning was over, and I had promised my presence to mine host at luncheon, his good lady being somewhat exercised at my

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abstinence from that meal these last few days, and regarding it as her personal concern that I should leave them with no need of another doctor. For I had spent three days in the woods, so to say, with the hope, I know, that I should meet the owner, and twice I had not been disappointed, so that time went for nothing, and the sandwiches which had been pressed on me early in the day lay forgotten in my satchel.

The Lady of the Lake eyed my preparations for departure in silence. "Of course," I added slowly, "one does not always call a person by the name one has given him."

"Him?" she asked.

"Her," I answered.

She propped her chin on her hands and looked away again.

"I think of you, for instance, by a name no one calls you."

"I do not want to hear it," she said.

"I believe you asked what it was," I answered. If she was not angry, at least the faintest tinge of colour flushed on her cheek and faded. There may have been a little toss of the chin. "I think of you as the Lady of the Lake." She never moved, nor betrayed a suspicion of

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interest in what I had said, and even then I marvelled that I had dared to say it. "And that explains a good deal;" but I found my voice was no longer as steady as it ought to have been, and I rose hurriedly.

"Have you finished your picture?" she asked.

"So far as it is worthy of the name of a picture, I have finished it."

"And is it your last?" There was never a question put in a more conventional form than that.

"With the permission of the Lady of the Lake, I had intended to begin my last picture to-morrow."

"And will that be the prettiest of all?"

"No," said I. For one moment she looked at me, and I could not be sure what my eyes were saying.

But her tone was unaltered when she spoke next. "And at the end of the week you will be going?"

"At the end of the week I shall bid good-bye to the Chief Butler."

"And to the Other Man?"

"And to the Other Man."

"Will the picture take you a week to paint?"

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She turned her back to me and spoke out over the water.

"I hope it will," said I ; and as she did not move I made to go. I left her standing there : she never once looked round nor spoke ; and I—who had said more than I had a right to say, and knew I must say no more—went up the path cursing myself that I had said so much, and—yes !—counting the hours till I should have the opportunity of saying it again.

CHAPTER XV

ALONG the side of the cricket-ground nearest to the house, and opposite the walk where I met the Dusty Lady, ran a path which I had hardly as yet explored, except earlier in my visit to note a strip of waste land and an outhouse or so ; nothing, at least for my paint-brush, and that is the measure of most things for such as I am. But on the afternoon following my morning with the Lady of the Lake, urged by some idle impulse, I turned down this path and, almost before I had looked ahead of me, met the Sinner running in the opposite direction. There was a hot sun on the countryside that day, as indeed there had been, praise heaven, most of that summer ; and the Sinner, following the custom of the school in such weather, was attired in a garb fitting the occasion. He was without coat or hat, and his flannels were not over-spotless ; but what struck me at the moment was that his

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small sun-burned arms terminated in two particularly muddy hands, and that he carried a spade (also muddy) and a watering-pot (bespattered with mud). At the sight of me he pulled up short, not, however, before the watering-pot had left its mark. He sought in vain for a handkerchief to repair damages, not greatly bettering his appearance by so doing.

"I didn't mean to splash you," he said. "The water-can—I suppose it wasn't quite empty; it must have been that little bit that always runs back into the can when you have done watering things. I never can quite empty it, unless I turn it upside down." Which he proceeded to do, wetting his stockings appreciably.

"But the watering-pot, Sinner, and the spade, and those splashed knickerbockers, and those very muddy hands,—what do they mean? What are you and the Problem doing with yourselves? And now I come to think of it, I haven't seen either of you for two,—three days." For a very good reason, thought I, and wondered if the boys guessed it.

"You haven't been anywhere about, though, have you? At least, we couldn't find you. We looked everywhere, the Problem and I. At

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least, not to-day—we thought it wasn't any good. The Problem said you were down at the lake," he added. "Were you?"

"I've made several sketches down there, as you know, Sinner. Of course, when the weather's fine——" But the Sinner looked at me so earnestly and unsuspiciously that to him of all people I found it physically impossible to make excuse.

"Do you like my Aunt's cousin?" he asked. "The Problem said you did."

"The Problem? Is he also among the prophets?"

The Sinner looked puzzled. "I don't know," he said at last. And seeing that I was laughing he coloured, as one having shown inexcusable ignorance.

"But what have you been doing?" I asked again, and the fresh subject chased away all thoughts of his unanswered question.

"Oh, we've been making a garden, down there, the Problem and I."

Then I saw that the dull strip of waste land had clothed itself in blue and green and scarlet; in a day and a night, as it seemed to me, for I had not set eyes on that path since first I noticed its barrenness, and that, after all, was like yester-

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day to one as happy as I had been. "The whole of that strip, Sinner?"

"Oh no," said he. "Why, those are the gardens of all the boys in the school; at least, all who want gardens. You see, there's a prize for the best garden, and the Problem and I thought we would have one together. We wanted to tell you, only we couldn't find you."

"Did you want me to dig, then?"

"You wouldn't have been allowed to. It says the gardens must be dug and planted by the boys themselves. We wanted to ask you some things,—at least, we did at first."

"Is it finished, then, the garden?"

"It's not exactly finished," said the Sinner; "at least I expect it will look better on the day. Of course, it's been rather hard work, because it takes a long time getting the water, and the can is such a big one. That's why my stockings are so wet, you see, because the can bumps against your legs, and then it splashes when you lift it off the spout of the pump. I wish I had a little water-can," he added meditatively. "Some of the boys have their own cans. Only this one belongs to everybody, and I can't always have it. I've done a good deal of watering, though."

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"You have indeed, Sinner. You might be Apollos, from the look of you. By the way, where is Paul?"

"Paul?" said the Sinner. "Why, he left last term. I was glad because——" He stopped. "But you never knew Paul, did you?" His face became troubled, and I did my best to look serious again. "I don't know what you mean," he added rather hopelessly.

"I meant to say Problem. I don't know why I said Paul; I must have been thinking of something else. But come, Sinner, I want to see this garden. Which is it? That one with the sweet-peas and the geraniums?"

The Sinner shook his head. "Oh no; that one has been planted a long time. Ours isn't so far on as that."

A somewhat lanky youth, engaged in plucking flowers from a well-stocked plot of ground, glanced up from his work at this moment, and seeing me came forward with the offer of a pink carnation. I accepted it with thanks, and having made some suitable remark on the prettiness of his garden, which appeared to please him mightily, passed on with the Sinner down the walk. Almost the same thing happened a few yards further on, only this time I was offered

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by a small fat boy a sprig of larkspur, evidently intended to join the carnation in my button-hole. I should have supposed this effect sufficiently hideous, but was compelled, before I had extended my triumphal progress a couple of feet, further to decorate myself with a marigold. The Sinner regarded me in silence. Then he looked wistfully at the monstrous combination of pink, blue, and orange. "It must be very nice," he said, "to be able to take flowers out of your garden, and leave it full enough for the day."

"Shall you not be able to do that?" asked I.

"No," said the Sinner sadly. "This is our garden, you see."

We had stopped almost at the end of the path, and the Sinner set down the can and the spade. Opposite me was an oblong piece of ground sloping up to the wall, surrounded on the available three sides with a border of small round pebbles. Every inch of it had been dug, raked, and watered,—drenched with water; in one corner was a kind of hole, apparently wetter even than the rest; and in the exact centre was a short, stoutish stick, to which was fastened a piece of string running out, so far as I could see,

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to an abrupt end under a rhubarb-leaf. The air was heavy with the scent of damp, sun-warmed mould.

I suppose I must have stared at it longer than I intended, for I suddenly became aware that the Sinner was gazing at me with an expression somewhat like one I had seen before when he asked me to lend him threepence. "That's very nice," I said,—judicially, I hope. "The—the seeds ought to do beautifully with the sun and all that water."

I do not know what I should have done if it had happened that there were no seeds. As it was, the Sinner's face brightened visibly. "Oh, *do* you think so?" he asked. "That was one of the things we—I wanted to ask you. That and the manure."

"Did you manure this, then, besides watering it?"

"Yes. There were some rabbits' insides, you know, that I got from the cook, because I saw the gardener burying a goat once, and I asked him what it was for, and he said to make the grapes grow. I believe some of them are there," he observed, thrusting a dead laurel-twig into the reeking soil and examining the point. "Yes. The gardener used a whole goat, but I should

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think for a small garden like this, rabbits would be enough."

"Certainly, Sinner. And how long have the seeds been planted?"

"Three days," said the Sinner promptly; "at least, it's over two days. We sowed them in the morning of the day before yesterday."

"But when is the day for the garden-prize?"

"It's—it's a week to-day. You see," he added hastily, "I thought if it was hot, and I watered them a good deal——" He stopped, and looked at me with a recurrence of his former anxiety.

I cast a searching glance at the sun and the tumbling masses of white clouds that rode near it. "I'm not sure, Sinner, if it wouldn't have been wiser to have used plants instead of seeds. Seeds, you see,—of course they are much more interesting,—but,—but—by the way, what seeds are they?"

"Mustard and cress," said the Sinner. It was fortunate that he did not wait. "All except this row, that is sweet-williams." Sweet-williams, to flower in a week! "You see," he went on, "of course if we had had more money we might have got better ones; but we only had fourpence, and the mustard and cress cost

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twopence, and the sweet-williams a penny. I meant to buy some mignonette, only I lost the other penny, so I couldn't."

Just then the rhubarb-leaf, or my eyes deceived me, began to move, proceeding in a circular manner round the stick in the centre of the garden. "Good heavens," I exclaimed, "what is that?"

"Oh, I forgot," said the Sinner, lifting the leaf. "That's a toad; I put it there to keep away the insects and things, like they do in hot-houses. I was afraid it might go into some one else's garden, so I fastened it here. I've made a collar for it."

He picked up the creature to show the method of its harnessing. It was a matter of two elastic bands, one round the neck of it, and a smaller one encircling its middle. Both were fastened above and beneath with a thin string, and a thicker string linked all to the peg. The Sinner placed it on the edge of the hole. It made a kind of half-step forward, struggled lazily and fell in. Arrived at the bottom it lay on its back for a short time, displaying a mottled underside, but it soon righted itself, and blinked at us with bright eyes.

"Do you think it is a very old toad?" asked

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the Sinner. "The Problem said it was. He had it in his hand, you know, and looked at its eyes,—right in he said he could see—and then he put it down and said it was so old it was beastly. He threw it away, but when he went I found it again. I like it rather."

"And is that its pond?"

"Yes. Well, it was full of water,—nearly full—at one time; only all the water ran away. That was one of the things I wanted to ask you, because I can't make the water stay in it anyhow. I did line it with stones, but it wasn't any good. I think the toad likes it, though, because it has gone in several times."

"Did you put it far from the edge?"

"Oh yes,—well, not so very far. You see, there were two toads at first, and I wanted them to meet, so I put one in the pond and the other on the edge, and then it fell in, you see. The other one escaped, though. I thought if I kept them they might have had young ones," added the Sinner. "Oh look, I do believe it's going to catch a fly."

The tethered animal was gaping dismally. I said that it was probably feeling unwell and had better be released. The Sinner looked greatly disappointed. "It seemed a very strong toad,"

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he said doubtfully ; " but perhaps it is really too old. I dare say I could find a younger one if I looked. I might find the one that escaped ; that was a very active toad."

I said that undoubtedly this one was past work, and released it. It sat perfectly still for maybe a minute, pushed out a tentative hind leg and crawled evilly into the shelter of a mignonette bed. The Sinner stooped and parted the flowers above it.

" It looks all right," he remarked dubiously. I know he had two minds about letting it go. He glanced at the string and the empty harness, then at the smooth wet mould. " There's so little in the garden now," he said.

I bethought me to ask another question. " Did you make this pebble-border ? "

" Yes. It says, you know, that there will be two garden-prizes ; one for the best flowers and another one for neatness. We thought we might get the one for neatness ; that was why we had the toad." He was still watching the mignonette.

" It is a very nice border," I observed. " None of the other gardens have pebble-borders, have they ? "

" No. It was the Problem thought of that ;

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I put in the stones, though. I like our border better than any of the others, I think." He glanced at the other gardens in order, and his eyes rested finally on one which was edged with red daisies in full bloom. "At least, that's rather a pretty one," he said.

"Yes."

"Of course, that's an expensive kind. I expect that cost over sixpence."

"Did it, do you think?"

"I suppose ordinary white daisies that grow on lawns wouldn't look so nice?"

"Not for a garden perhaps."

"How do daisies become double daisies?"

"I think it's cultivating them, that and a good deal of attention, I should fancy."

"You couldn't make single daisies into double daisies by watering them a good deal, I suppose, could you? Or by manure,—wouldn't manure do?"

"I think it would take rather a long time, Sinner."

"Not if you got a good deal of manure? But there would hardly be time, would there?"

"Hardly."

"You see, the garden prize-day is in a week."

"Yes."

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"I wish I had some money," said the Sinner.

An idea struck me. "What is the prize? I mean, is it a spade, or a book, or some money, or what?"

"It's a book; I don't know what its name is."

"But you would never read it, would you?"

The Sinner debated for a minute before answering. "No, perhaps I shouldn't. I might sell it, though. I sold a book my Aunt gave me for sixpence once."

"Dear me! What was it?"

"It—it was called Pilgrim's Progress,—about Christians."

"And who bought it?"

"My Aunt's cousin did. I asked her if she would, you know."

"Should you sell this prize to her, if you got it?"

"I should ask her to buy it. She would, I expect; she's awfully rich."

"I know it, Sinner, I know it. But what would you do with the money?"

"Buy fishing-tackle," he answered without a moment's hesitation; "a rod and a line and

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some floats. I love floats," he added ; " I used to make them in school. But I told you about that, didn't I ? "

" You did, Sinner ; it was very disgraceful." But the Sinner was past blushing for such memories. He lifted the mignonette where the toad had lain. " Why, it's gone ; it can't be far, though."

" Sinner," said I, " suppose I were to offer a garden-prize ? I mean, for a different kind of garden from these ; not for one with geraniums and sweet-peas and stocks and asters and so on, but one with just wild flowers in it, daisies and poppies and buttercups, that you could get anywhere." The Sinner abandoned his search for the missing reptile and gazed at me with an expression of intense interest. " You might even have a rockery with ferns," I suggested ; " and the Problem could make you a waterfall or something of the kind. Then, you see, you wouldn't have to buy plants at all."

The Sinner drew in his breath quickly as the notion presented itself to him with all its possibilities. " Oh, do you really mean it ? So that wild flowers would count like the ones you buy ? "

" Certainly ; and then we might have the

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prize in money, so that you wouldn't have to sell it."

"Would it be enough to buy a fishing-rod? A cheap one, I mean."

I was doubtful as to what would be considered a cheap fishing-rod. "What is the largest amount of money that you have ever had at the same time?" I asked.

The Sinner reflected. "I think one-and-threepence," he said at last. "At least, I borrowed the shilling."

"Supposing I made the prize ten shillings. That would be five shillings each. Would that buy a cheap fishing-rod?"

But the Sinner was so dumfounded, as I imagine, by the glorious vista which was thus unfolded that for a short time speech forsook him. When he did speak I did not expect the answer he gave me. "Are you sure you can spare it?"

"I haven't had to pay it yet, Sinner. You and the Problem will have to work for it. By the way, where is the Problem?"

I was surprised at the consequence of my question, for his face became troubled. "Oh, I forgot," he said.

"Forgot what?"

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"About the Problem."

"What about him?"

He hesitated. "Well, he's gone away."

"I suppose he'll come back?"

His eyes became more troubled. "I don't know. You see, if he knew it was you offered the prize——"

"Well?"

"Perhaps he wouldn't work for it."

I did not understand. "But why not, Sinner? Do you mean he doesn't want a prize?"

"Oh no. He would like a prize awfully; he's always wanting to buy things, only he can't, you see, because we never have any money hardly. He would like the five shillings, I know. Shall I say it's my Aunt's cousin's prize?"

"But, Sinner, why not mine?"

The Sinner was silent, and I repeated the question. "You see, I think he's angry with you for something. I don't quite know about it, only he said he hoped you wouldn't come, and if you did he was going away. He did go away, just before I ran into you. Perhaps he saw you coming."

The Problem, of all people! Absurd, thought I, and wondered what the Sinner was dreaming

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about. Yet I must have let some faint expression of displeasure cross my face, for the Sinner laid a small brown hand on my sleeve. "Don't be angry with us. You won't, will you? You know *I* don't mind your liking my Aunt's cousin, a bit."

Oho! That's the secret of all this how-de-do? I declare I could not help laughing. "Angry, my dear Sinner? Why, of course not." And then something serious in it struck me. "You must let me think," I added, and I walked up the path pondering over the unexpected puzzle. That an imp of thirteen in patched trousers should be jealous of a man of my age, and jealous for the love of a lady—even of such a lady as my Lady of the Lake—ridiculous! Nothing more than to laugh at! And when next I saw the Problem I meant to shake him,—no, but to ignore the whole absurdity. Indeed, I began to wonder if the pair of them had left me a rag of what is commonly called dignity, when I could think of any other possible ending to the matter than silence.

But that he should have guessed it all! And if he, had others guessed it? And then,—had she guessed it? She, whom I was to leave

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within the week, the word unspoken because of my unworthiness—oh, and I had not cared for that either, I know, but would have spoken and chanced the answer if there had not been—what? A red brick house and broad acres? And that thought settled matters. I was to leave her in a week, and I need think of nothing but that,—unless that I was to leave her in silence. Another dignified silence? That set me laughing again, and I could laugh, for was there not a week left,—a week of mornings such as to-day's had been,—that given, and what matter thereafter?

In the evening from my window I watched the two boys walking slowly in the direction of their garden. I made no doubt the Sinner had taken some opportunity of explanation and had converted the other to a more sensible view of things. Indeed, I hardly thought over it at all, except that the Problem's figure recalled my conversation with the Sinner; for I was occupied, as you may imagine, with remembrances of the morning I had spent in the woods, and counting the hours till the morrow, when I was to begin another picture,—my last, but if she were to watch me make it?

After an hour or so I strolled out, and half

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instinctively to the gardens. I came to them by a path opposite to the one I had taken earlier in the day, so as to meet the Sinner's end of the gardens first. Truth to tell, I feared another nosegay. Within a few paces of the strip of ground they had chosen I stopped ; a hedge ran between us, and I could hear the voices of the boys beyond. There was a sound as of trodden clinkers, and then a swish of water ; then came excited cries from the Sinner, and I turned the corner.

A vague pyramidal heap of clinkers stood on one side under the wall. From this ran a kind of conduit consisting of a short gutter-pipe, much bent and distorted, and poised over a muddy course of reeking, shifting mould, which took the shortest road to the pond. The Sinner, his knickerbockers bespattered with mud, and water bright on his dripping stockings and shoes, stood astride on the pyramid, a nearly empty zinc can fulfilling its last obligations into the gutter-pipe. "Dam it, dam it !" he shrieked, and had I not seen the can I should not have taken in the spelling. As it was, a child, three or four gardens away, looked up from his work with a startled expression on his face, caught my eye (and I was laughing) and

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his cheeks went the colour of his carnations ; then the water-pot came into his picture and he understood and bent in confusion over his flowers again.

The Problem thrust a well-meant spadeful of earth to check the seething whirlpool of the pond, which already brimmed in a very menacing manner. Alas ! it toppled over with a sound of swallowing into the scum, and in stepping back to avoid the splash of it he caught sight of me. For a moment he gazed at me fixedly, and I perforce stared back at him. In a flash my innocent offer of a prize for a wild-flower garden stood naked in the reality it must have seemed to him—a bribe ! I do not think his eyes dropped sooner than mine ; and then he thrust the spade into the pasty loam, his hands into his pockets, and walked slowly down the path round the corner and out of sight.

I stood and stared at him. I was recalled to a sense of the present by the discovery that I was standing in a pool of water. I looked about me and saw that the pond had overflowed, as was but natural. The muddy fluid that remained in it was composing itself sulkily enough into the saturated sides of the hollow,

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leaving behind it a froth that hissed and grew less as you looked. A dozen odd daisy-roots, buttercup-plants, and so forth were littered by the side of it, and the spade lay on all, stealthily fallen from the upright. The Sinner regarded me with extraordinary sadness. "I was afraid you would come," he said.

"Have I, then, spoiled it all, Sinner?" I asked.

But the Sinner turned away and answered with his back to me after a decent pause. "He said he would help me, but not if you came. Of course I couldn't tell you that, but I hoped—hoped——" The fishing-rod, then, had faded from his horizon.

"Well, I am going indoors now. And if you take my advice, you will begin planting your flowers yourself. Then, perhaps, the Problem will come back." But I knew he would not.

When I reached the end of the walk I looked over my shoulder. The Sinner was kneeling in the muddy path, his back turned to the few other boys who were gardening, and his head very near the ground, engaged with a buttercup that would not stand up.

I was laughing again over the Problem's

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absurdities when suddenly another thought flitted—like a swift scarlet bird through a mist—across my mind's eye : *as well be hanged for a sheep as for a lamb* ; and the fascination of that thought occupied me all the evening. And I know it was early when I called down on the Problem the blessing of every saint in the calendar, knocked out my pipe, and went to bed, to bring the morrow quicker.

CHAPTER XVI

As well be hanged for a sheep as for a lamb.

I woke up with the words on my lips ; and it was not a matter of much more than an hour before I had shouldered my easel and so down the path to the woods. And if I put any definite application to the proverb,—which I doubt, for when a man's pulse gallops, he loses count of colder reasonings—it was this. If the Problem (thirteen years old and patched trousers) had guessed my secret, I was not to expect that others were ignorant ; and if others, might not she have guessed it ? But then, if she had, she came yesterday to me, and might have come to hear me tell it all. At all events, my good resolutions went to the winds, and the winds were blowing out to the sea. I tell you, I began to sing, and my breath played all manner of tricks, and I could not utter a note, so that I strode along silently, wondering at the change wrought in me. For if I was sane yesterday,

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I was mad enough to-day, and I knew it : yet my madness was the most delirious joy I could have fancied possible ; the most wonderful throbbing of every fibre to the wildest anthem of a dream ; the thrill of every little pulse, every tiny beat of blood ; a fever, a longing, a purpose, and the purpose inspiring fierce influences of passion into every movement, every thought : ay, I was mad enough, and the joy of the madness argued it right and good, and a thing to rejoice over, that a man might be as mad as I was. Every sense in me was a power, acute, keen, the acme of sense : I saw everything, I heard everything, I felt everything ; I saw the broad leafage of the oaks tremble and sway in the wind ; I saw the rabbits scudding the covert, a tree-creeper poised by the fork of its tail-feathers on the bark of an elm, the tiniest bronze beetle sunning itself on a fern-frond ; I heard the sharp cry of jays, the crow of pheasants, the whirring scrape of grass-hoppers ; I felt the turf resilient and firm beneath me ; and I can see that scene and hear those sounds now as I saw and heard them then. I was buoyant, tingling, alive through and through ; I had never till that morning known what it was to live.

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Once, when a child in the North, I was shown a large boulder, whether by denudation of water, or by a landslip, or from some other cause, so exactly balanced on its sharper end that the slightest touch sent it swaying forward and backward, always to regain its perfect equilibrium, —a rocking-stone as we called it. I had wondered then what would be the power required to overset it altogether, to send it thundering down the hillside to rest in the river; and as I went swinging down the wood-path I found myself comparing my mental balance to that of the rocking-stone, urged out by a wild impulse of folly, pulled, dragged back by a reserve force of wisdom, and finally upheaved, set free, driven headlong by a power too great to be resisted, sped to its goal by latent properties of its own. And if I were the rocking-stone, then the external power were nothing stronger than the influence of a fellow-mortal I had not set eyes on three months before,—a glance from the eyes of one who saw the world as I now saw it, the jealousy of a thirteen-year-old boy with a patch on his breeches!

My picture I had chosen over-night. A winding path that led down to the lake, and earlier in the year was clothed in a carpet of

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bluebells ; I was to set my easel there, and thence across the lake, I had the moorland away to the horizon, grey rocks and birches for the middle distance, the lake below all, and the house to the right, just a hint of red in the water. I knew that from one window of the house my Lady of the Lake could make sure, if she chose, that I was at work, and I stood for a moment watching, with half a hope of a glimpse of her wide straw hat even then, but—I cannot tell why—with the certainty that my picture would not be far advanced before she herself were near me to give judgment on it. So I set up my easel and out with my pencil to shape an outline.

A kingfisher shot across the lake, a streak of azure and orange. I watched it flirt into a willow, and then—I cannot guess for how long—waited for it to reappear. A dove in a stone-fir beyond the water began to purr, the sweetest croon of a sound it was, and I listened as if under a spell. Then a wood-pigeon in the larches far away to the left struck up—“Take *two* sheep David, take *two* sheep David”—I never heard so beautiful a monotone, and remembered how I had been first taught to listen to

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it by my uncle's old gardener, and how the village loons set that phrase to its complaining. Next a pair of squirrels began chattering in a yew-tree ; I watched them chase each other, leap, climb, scramble, till half the tree was dancing, and the bryony and clematis quivered with the light shock of their little bodies. And all the while my paper was white and empty.

I set to work manfully ; but I had to learn then, as I had learned at the lake once before, and knew pretty well before that too, that there are times when a picture will not come. The brushes, the box, the paper, the will to make it, and even the skill, for what that be worth, are there, with you ; but a picture,—that is another matter. Every sight, every sound took me away from my work: these squirrels and pigeons and kingfishers at any other time I should have taken little heed of, unless may be to work the atmosphere, the life of them, into my picture ; but now I must watch with intentness each single movement, listen to each cry, and get no good from it, so far as a painting may be called a good. In short, I was condemned to take everything in, to get nothing out ; and all the

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while *Tell her, tell her*, rang in my ears, and her face came between me and my picture, until I found that my pencil was running away with me, and myself sketching in a little curl that lay on her forehead, and then—oh, but the fire in my veins danced and leaped again, and I was making a picture of my Lady of the Lake, a picture as beautiful and live as I saw her last, so that each line and touch gave me exquisite joy and pleasure, and I began to believe, if I was reasoning at all, that my brush had disobeyed me over the landscape to give me this delirium of a portrait instead of it.

Never before had I worked, never since have I worked as I worked then. I had not believed the joy of creation so magnificent; I had not deemed it possible that the labour of a man's thought could be so intense an energy, the activity of production so god-like an emotion. Her eyes and the droop of her lashes, the pure seduction of her glance, the poise of her chin, the entrancing curves of her mouth, the great glory of her hair,—boldly, fiercely, rightly I painted, till she looked at me from my painting, alive, with words on her lips, and the scent of her hair about me, and in her eyes—ah, but

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in her eyes there was something which was not her, but myself, the mingling into her of myself, the life that leaped in me living in her, ay, and something more than life. I stared at it, drew nearer, and read it, and knew it. It was I, I that looked at me, I that loved me ; the hope and the soul of a man gazing at him from flat paper.

I recoiled from it, and then there was a little cry from behind me, and my big wash-brush was lifted and dashed upon the face before me, —a blur of blue and brown. She stood there, her lips parted, her eyes afire, and made short, quick, terrified sweeps at it, blotted it out, annihilated it.

“How can you? How dare you?” she cried,—and yet her cry was a whisper. She dropped the brush, and stood there, her hands clasping and unclasping.

I do not know when she went away. But I believe it was hours afterwards that I took the paper from the board, quietly and mechanically, and down to the lake-side. I dipped it in the water and washed it to and fro, saying to myself, “Water-colours, only water-colours,” till it was all white and wet and heavy. And then I

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crumpled it together and threw it far into the water ; it sank, and I went up the path to my easel again.

And so mechanically I returned to the school. I do not think I saw or heard anything ; but I knew that I had lost some part of me, and that she had taken it away.

CHAPTER XVII

I MUST have slept for hours, though it was little past three in the morning when I awoke and found the first greyness of the dawn creeping into the room. I was wide awake, though, at the very moment, and started up, knowing that something had happened. For the time I could not tell what, but as the white light grew behind the blind, and the shadows slid into the corners, it came back to me slowly ; the morning of yesterday, the wind on my face as I strode down to the lake, the wood-pigeons and the colour of the water, and then in a flash my picture of the Lady of the Lake, the delirium, the madness of it all. Yester evening I was as a man crushed, emasculated, impotent, unable for any but mere physical action, but now I was thinking with admirable clearness ; I could reason, question, probe to the pith of things ; never had I possessed a serener vision, calmer

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faculties ; never had I known myself so well-balanced, never so rightly poised in mind, in understanding ; never had I been so sane.

A sparrow woke in the ivy, and through the open window I could hear it shake itself, then another sparrow, and faint cheepings and the rustle of straw and feathers ; soon there were a round dozen twittering and chirping. I went to the window, pulled up the blind, and looked out. I remembered doing so once before in May, when the world woke differently. For then it woke to the sleepless love of the night-ingales,—a wonder of song, insistent, continuous, passionate, careless of anything save the need of singing ; but now it woke from silence, soberly, and then to singing as to the day's duty. And my day's duty ! I began to plan out what it must be. A forgetfulness of the three past months, a cup of oblivion, a capful of Lethe ; and to me then all that seemed as easy a matter as could be,—nay, but I had forgotten it already. I was to be no more than a painter, a poor painter ; my day's care to cease at sundown, and naught else to think on but the critics and bachelor waistcoat-pockets, full or empty. And I know (impossible as I should have thought it a score of hours earlier) it was

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a relief to me to believe all this ; I felt as if a great burden had been lifted, an intolerable load taken on another's shoulders, and myself—in a word, free. Yet in the grey dawn, that self-analysis was able to be so merciless, that I knew also that I had lost something ; some capacity, capability, something which I had not even the power of regretting, as if I had never known what it was. I could look at my being as at another's : my existence became objective to myself ; and the consciousness of this did not even puzzle me, so clear it seemed.

I dressed and went out into the garden. I took my painting materials to a corner of the field beyond the sunk fence that divided lawn from meadow, and made out a sketch of a corner of the terrace, grey stone and lichen against a sky of rose-petals, (happiness coming for the farmers that dry summer !) and in the foreground a pair of peacocks, and green patches slapped on dew-grey grass by clumsy wings—a brilliant piece of colouring it was, and I set it aside, the work of four hours maybe, well pleased ; as indeed I was well pleased then with all the work of that week, and opened my portfolio later to find in those pictures a curious difference from the style of my usual work.

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And to tell the truth I never sold one of them ; but of that there is more to be said.

Later in the morning I picked out a wall of climbing roses, and did my best to set the colour of them on paper. Indeed, during that week I found it was the stronger colouring of life that I sought : a pair of peacocks and a sky that meant rain ; a wall of crimson roses and an Italian air beyond it ; a splash of poppies on ripened corn. My usual taste has been something quieter than that : the peace of an English evening, the chromes and sage and distant blue-greens of a wide stretch of country ; but now, new colour-schemes, and the bolder the better.

The Sinner spied me, as I had expected, during the half-hour before luncheon. He had recovered, apparently, from the sadness of the evening when I left him battling with his buttercup-plants ; and to see him come up to me, I wondered if there existed a happier mortal. Evidently the buttercups were doing well.

“ Oh, what lovely roses,” he said.

I cannot guess whether it was only the sound of the child's voice, or whether it recalled to me some pent-up memory of sorrow, something infinitely far away,—I cannot tell ; but I know

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there swept over me such a wave of unhappiness that I was not able to answer, nor so much as to look round.

However, it seemed he noticed nothing out of the common. "I worked at my garden all yesterday," he went on; "I've planted ever so many daisies and buttercups and things." I could think of no reply to that either; but in no way discouraged, however, he continued, "They look awfully fine. I've put all the daisies round the edge, and the buttercups in the middle, except the ones that hadn't much root, and I put those at the side, in case they died. But they haven't died yet, and I think if I water them enough they ought to get some new roots. And there's the manure, too,—I should think that would help." No, there was nothing to say to that. "There's the gentian off the dog's grave, too, the postman's dog, you know. I thought it wouldn't matter, so I dug it up, and I've planted it near the pond. Oh, and the pond and the rockery, I forgot. I've got a lot of moss and put it on the clinkers the gardener gave me out of the stoke-hole, and now it looks just like a real rockery, and if you pour water in at the top of the pipe it makes a waterfall." I managed to nod. "Of course,

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I'm going to put back the gentian, when you, —after the day, I mean. I wanted to ask if you thought it would matter, only I couldn't find you. You see, I've had to do it all alone," said the Sinner with something of a sigh. "The Problem wouldn't help me, because he said—were you down at the lake all yesterday?" he asked.

I believe he thought I was laughing at him. I knew that he had altered his position, and was no longer behind me ; but I could not look at his face. I found I was making an amazing mess of my roses. There was an interval of silence.

"Have you got toothache?" he inquired, after (I imagined) a prolonged scrutiny of my countenance. I nodded, and he stood there a minute or so. Then a sudden idea seemed to strike him, and he was off to the house, running all the way.

I suppose that in the early morning and during the first part of the day, although all the mental faculties in me seemed keen and alert and polished, so to say, there was yet something beyond these which had been dulled, blunted, numbed. There come such experiences to every man, it must be ; but for women there

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is the relief of tears, called forth, I dare say, by nothing much more important than the voice of a child.

Late in the afternoon the Sinner came running from the house. I am afraid the sketch had prospered little, but I did not realise that until I looked at it later. He was full of what he had done for me.

"I've brought you this," he said, very much out of breath. "I hope it's all right. I got it from the matron for you. You put it on with a brush. I didn't bring one, because I knew you had a lot in your box." My sables, doubtless. "Or else, she says, you can get some cotton-wool. Oh, but it puts all about it on the bottle." Here he handed me a small phial marked *Poison* on a red label. It was quite warm, almost hot. "I couldn't come before ; I had my sentences to do again. I can't do sentences, you know."

"Can't you, Sinner? What are sentences?" So I had found my voice at last.

"Oh, Latin sentences ; I thought you knew. But aren't you going to use some of that stuff?"

I held the bottle up to the light. "There doesn't seem very much in it, Sinner." In fact, it was stark empty. I uncorked it ;

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laudanum in some form it seemed to have been. The Sinner gazed at it with apprehension. "How full was it at first, Sinner?"

"Oh, quite full. The matron gave it me just before dinner, and then I was going to give it to you after dinner, only I had to do my sentences you know, so I couldn't."

"And what did you do with it then?"

"I put it in my pocket." He glanced down. "Oh," said he ruefully, "I never thought of that."

"Yes," said I.

There was a vague brown patch showing on the outside of the cloth. He turned the pocket inside out. Nearly all the contents of the bottle appeared to have lodged in a rather crumpled envelope, which seemed endowed with spongy properties to an alarming extent. "I wonder I never noticed it," he said. "I thought the bottle was rather wet, when I took it out."

"What is in the envelope?"

"It's—it's a biscuit," confessed the Sinner with shame on his face. "It—it was for the toad. That was the other day; I thought it would eat it, so I saved it. Shall I throw it away?"

I suggested it would be better in its present

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condition to bury it. He was gazing with sorrow at the offending pocket. "Oh dear," he said at last, as if to himself, "the matron will be angry. You see, I can't wash it."

"No," said I, "I don't quite see how you can."

"You know," he went on, "the matron says I give her more trouble than all the rest of the school put together. She says my clothes are always in rags, and if it wasn't that she worked her fingers to the bone I shouldn't have any at all."

"It certainly looks rather like it, Sinner, especially when you turn round, you know."

"I hate the matron," observed the Sinner pensively.

"How about the Problem?" I asked after a little, by way of changing the subject.

"I don't know where he is. At least I think——"

"Haven't you seen him, then?"

"I just saw him after dinner, and he asked if you were down at the lake, so I said no, and he seemed rather surprised; but he didn't say anything." Without thinking what I was doing, I held the empty laudanum-bottle up to the light. "Oh, I forgot. Is your toothache very bad?"

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"I haven't got toothache," I said, taken off my guard.

"Oh," said the Sinner. "I thought you said——" He stopped, evidently puzzled. "Would you like me to get you anything?" he asked at last.

"No, Sinner, no ; run away, there's a good boy."

The Sinner obeyed at once, in obvious perplexity. At the end of the rose-walk there stood an open tank, used for watering purposes. He stopped at this, and, dipping his handkerchief in it, began to scrub his knickerbockers. If he thought about it at all, he might have remembered I had not thanked him for bringing the laudanum. I was remorseful at the thought of the trouble the child had taken. "Don't, Sinner ; you'll catch cold," I called to him. He started and ceased his ablutions. I meant him to come back ; but he construed my tone into something of a reproof I suppose, and after wringing out his soused handkerchief and replacing it in his pocket, he glanced uncertainly in my direction, took a half-step down the path, changed his mind, and I lost sight of him.

CHAPTER XVIII

I SPENT my evening alone. I was in no mood for conversation, and must have seemed a very ungracious guest to mine host for the remainder of that week, unless, as I more than half suspected, he had a notion of my reasons. For come to think of it, with a charitable motherly body, like his good lady, to wife, he must have had a fairly clear idea of the cause which took me so often to the lake, and had not set it down to the colour of the trees or the water. And it occurred to me that it might be best to hint again to him the subject of my departure. I had more than once alluded to this of late, and always with misgivings, lest he should fall in with my suggestion ; but on each occasion I was met with a point-blank refusal to let me go, at least until the school-term was at an end, and I acquiesced with a readiness not too prompt, I hope, and thanked the powers for

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the boon of another month, another fortnight, another week even. But now,—ah, well, the world was awry, and I began to think almost with longing of my lonely studio ; yet it was with a growing conviction that some way or other, however I might school my thoughts to the present, these three summer months must be more to me at the last than a mere memory, past and done with. You can see that I had not realised it ; I mean, had not realised all that was meant by my Lady of the Lake's *How dare you?*—the entire severance that it must make for me from this part of the world, if I valued my self-respect at the price of a third-class ticket to the next station.

I do not know how far the Sinner and the Problem had discussed the probabilities of matters ; but I fancy that the latter, at least, knew pretty well how the wind was blowing, though I saw nothing of him. He must have explained as much to the other, for on the day after the laudanum incident I was sitting in front of an easel-full of bald colour, my brush dried to a point, and I suppose with a sufficiently melancholy countenance, when I heard steps behind me, and a small hand was laid gently on my shoulder.

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"Don't be miserable," said the Sinner, and withdrew his hand the moment he had spoken, in fear of having said too much. "I've just been burying a cat," he went on hurriedly,—he had prepared this story, I was sure, as something cheerful by way of news—"a huge spotted sort of cat, white and brown and yellow. The garden-boy killed it with a rake,—it was stealing a chicken. He said it had stolen ever so many chickens, and he had been waiting there three hours for it, and at last it came round the corner and he hit it on the head and broke its back."

"Dear me, Sinner! Did you bury the chicken too?"

"Oh, it hadn't stolen the chicken then; it was going to. He said he was sure it was that cat,—at least he said so after it was dead. He did tell me once he was sure it was a black cat," added the Sinner thoughtfully. "I expect he changed his mind. I measured it with my handkerchief; it was enormous, and tremendously fat too. It's quite the biggest grave there is."

Evidently this had been no pauper burial. I inquired whether it would be dignified with a slate.

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"No," he answered ; "just a cross. I can't think of a name though. Oh, will you, would you mind, that is—will you think of a name,—any name, you know ? Because I must go in now, it's time for school. Do think of one for me."

I expressed my readiness to do what I could by way of immortalising the creature, and he pulled out a French grammar, and ran off to the school snatching occasional glimpses at a very dragged page of verbs.

I could not help wondering how the Problem was taking all this. For that he should voluntarily forego the society of the Sinner for three days was no less inexplicable to me than his attitude towards myself. But that he was a strange youth, and not to be judged by mere mortal standards, I knew ; and perhaps it was inevitable after all, if he had bestowed upon one person the blind affection commonly given by a child to its parent (and I knew him to be an orphan), that he should be jealous with all the strength of his original nature of the unlucky wight who might seem to rival him. And perhaps he had fancied the Sinner in some way my accomplice. Yet now that the hated rival (I heard afterwards that was the term he applied

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to me) was down in the dust, would it not be magnanimous to pardon him?

In truth I began to regard the end of term-time as a sort of goal, a happy release from suffering. I fancied,—nay, I was sure—that I could forget it all in the din and hurry of town-life, and though I knew that I should part with mine host and his lady with regret, and with something more than that from the Sinner, and ah, with unspeakable regret, *desiderium*, as we used to turn it in the old days of lyrics and elegiacs, and I know no English word that so exactly expresses the longing for something that has been and can be no more—*quo desiderio*, then, must I look for the last time at the lake and the woods and the red-brick house; still, every sight and sound—the Sinner's straw hat, and mine host's cheery smile, and the tinkle and clamour of the school-bell so irresistibly called back to me the happiness of the days before that beautiful, terrible portrait stared at me, that I instinctively cried *enough*, and would have done with it all once and for ever.

As for the Problem, the explanation came on the following day. I had named the Sinner's cat for him (Emily I think it was), and he had inquired with a certain amount of shyness

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whether I would like to see his garden. I assented, and we set off across the cricket-ground. The Sinner's countenance was expressive of much misgiving, and I wondered what he was going to tell me—a sudden blight on the buttercups, perhaps, or an alarming landslip; I imagined the rockery choking the pond and his daisies crushed by the gutter-pipe; but it was nothing of the kind.

"Are you angry with the Problem?" I could hear that the question had troubled him.

"Of course not, Sinner," I answered. He seemed doubtful. "My dear Sinner, I am never angry with any one. Will that satisfy you?" It should, I thought.

"Well, will you forgive him? He's awfully miserable, you know."

"Forgive him for what?"

"Oh, well, for being beastly to you—oh, you know what I mean, don't you?—I can't explain things. Only he won't ask you, I know. Oh do! At least, don't say anything, only be just ordinary, and then he'll know."

"My dear Sinner, if only I could ever expect to be anything but just ordinary. Hopelessly ordinary, Sinner, sour *vin ordinaire*."

"Well, will you? Because we're just coming

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there. Oh, do be quick!" The Sinner's eyes were those of a puppy about to be unchained.

And then I understood. This was a reconciliation planned by the Sinner; doubtless the Problem was at work in the garden. A kind of Jacob-and-Esau business, and I the Supplanter, presumably. "I will be just ordinary," said I. As I expected, the Problem was occupied with some employment which allowed us to advance as near as possible without making it necessary for him to look up. I complimented the Sinner on the changed appearance of his plot of ground, and he could with difficulty restrain his delight and excitement. "Oh, do you think we shall get the prize?" he asked, oblivious apparently of the fact that I had offered it.

I assumed a critical expression, and pointed my stick sternly at a faded buttercup. "I can't say for certain till the day comes. I can't have that sort of thing, though; that will never do. All the flowers must be perfectly fresh and alive. And I shall not tell you when I am coming round; it will be a surprise-visit, a sort of police-inspection."

The Problem had uprooted the offending buttercup at the word, and that I think ended

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his quarrel with me. After a sentence or two more of advice on horticulture in general I left them, putting themselves to the utmost pains to correct the posture of some very despondent daisies.

Curiously enough (and I wondered at it even then) I had slept these three nights without ruffling the pillow, as you may say. I had expected wakeful, disordered dreams; and instead, each morning when I woke I could hardly remember more than my face touching the cool linen the night before. I put this down to exhaustion, an over-draft on nature during the day, and much I hoped matters need not change. But that fourth night! I suppose I had half forgotten some of my troubles during the day, and they came back to me.

I do not know how long I slept; it may in all have been hours. I heard the cuckoo-clock in the hall cluck out the half-hours till after two in the morning, and fell to cursing its cheerful mockery. And then came short intervals of half-consciousness between fevers of dreaming. I was painting my portrait over again, and watched it grow each time till it glared at me and the brush swept it out of existence. I started up always as the face was blurred, and

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always with a dull knowledge somewhere at the back of my head that I could not wake enough to know it was a dream,—and so to dream again. Then came the pursuit ; a hideous pursuit of me by a man whose face I could never see,—tried to see and feared to see. Soon the man became a face, and flitted after me, miles away behind and at a tremendous rate,—I was flying across fields, ditches, hedges in an ecstasy of fear, and always with a cliff before me I must be over at last. And then the face became my own, and leered at me from behind every curtain and wall and tree, leered and was gone. The agony of that inability to wake, to become myself ! Never could I find a friend during that long night ; it was a desert-world I lived in, and myself an enemy that followed me every mile of it. Then after some time there came the realisation of a guess I was making as I fled,—I was guessing this for hours, and at last knew what the guess meant—that some power was directing the pursuit ; and behold my Lady of the Lake, the face of my portrait, and in the eyes of it myself, again and again. You knew, I said to myself, that you must suffer ; these have been easy days, these three, and nights of sleep. You feared to lie

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awake ; you know now that what you have to dread is sleep and the terror of sleep.

I must have been freed from it all at some hour near the dawn. I woke from a heavy stupor when the sparrows were well into the day's work, unable at first to do more than bless the sunlight and deliverance. But another night like this, thought I, if indeed it was but a night, for I did not make up my mind to that without weighing reasons. And if in these dreams there was a measure even of truth ? What if the Lady of the Lake, when she made my picture a blur and a smudge, had in very deed set free, sent wild, some part of a fellow-being, and that the complex Being we call Man, as if I were a number of *egos*, and she had loosed one of them ? Nay, but she had done so ; she held me by chains ; I was her own, and she chose to torture me. There was a hideous conclusion to that ; and again I determined to pack my goods, and be gone that day. You may see that I was not very logical when I was dressing ; if I had anticipated what was to happen in the afternoon, I might have made a saner argument.

I knew that there was distraction to be found in work ; but I believe that I spent most of

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that morning dozing in a summer-house ; perhaps it was inevitable after such a night. Yet at times reason returned to me in a measure, and I found myself laughing at what was behind me, and not much afraid of what lay in front. Once, indeed, I compared my position with that of the Other Man, and wondered whether such dreams as mine ever visited him. I remembered something of what he told me on the way back from a certain garden-party. Well, he had no cause to be jealous of me, at all events.

Insensibly I began to speculate on the future of the Chief Butler. The Other Man, I knew, had money ; by so much his lot was the easier. But the Chief Butler, and his black leather book ? Was it possible that he also kept in the background some shrine at which he worshipped ? There occurred to me his definite answer when I suggested he would need a wife to help him, when he had realised that school-in-the-air he was for ever building for our benefit. He had said that he would be married ; and I tried to imagine his wife,—stout, coarse, florid, good-humoured, a little top-knot,—oh, but that was my old landlady Mère Dindon : the butler marrying the cook ; no encumbrance,—I was away on another tack. And so on and so

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on ; think coherently that morning I could not.

I returned to the summer-house in the afternoon, carrying my sketch-book with me to avoid comment, and lazily began turning over the leaves. One of the first drawings that caught my eye was the picture I made of the Sinner that first evening at the school. I cannot say how in a moment it recalled to me the sights and the sounds of that quiet hour under my laburnum-tree ; the hint of cowslips coming down the wind, the vesper-hymns of thrushes, the cool primrose-clumps, and the white violets in the ivy of the terrace. My thoughts must have gone far afield, and the sun was at six or more when I noticed almost with a start that the entrance to the summer-house was darkened.

The Lady of the Lake was standing on the grass beyond the gravel-path. Her hand rested on the Problem's shoulder and her eyes were alight with laughter. The Sinner stood by her.

I believe I had determined, should fortune throw me again across her path, to treat her as if our meetings had been those of the most casual acquaintances in the world. I was to ignore the past completely ; to hold her as nothing more than a chance friend,—no, but not

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even a friend—and if I must speak to her (which I considered the unlikeliest of impossibilities) I was—heaven forgive me!—to discuss the weather: yes, and several other lunatic resolves I made, of which there need only be said that, so soon as she came into my life again, I did not even know that I broke them.

“Good-afternoon,” she said, and nodded at me with her lips twitching. I do not know what I said. “No, I don’t want to sit down, thank you. Don’t get up; I like standing here.” And she stood smiling at me. “I’ve been walking about with these boys looking for you everywhere. This one says you’ve been quite different lately, and he doesn’t know what is the matter. I’m so sorry.”

“A passing fit of the blues,” I managed to reply, recalling the colour that was in my wash-brush.

“It doesn’t improve the appearance, does it?” she answered. “But I came down here to say something interesting, which is this,—that I have asked these boys’ master if they may spend the first few days of the holidays with me. And it seems—after I had obtained his consent, and thought everything was arranged—that they had settled to spend Tuesday morning with you.”

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"I don't remember——" I began.

"So this boy tells me," she said, drawing the Sinner towards her. "And the only solution of the difficulty that I can see is that you should bring them down to me on that morning, and you can take your affecting farewell in the woods. Will that do, Sinner,—isn't that your name?"

The Sinner hesitated, waiting, I think, for me to speak.

"Then that's settled," she said, with her eyes still going dark and light with laughter. And putting out an arm to each of the boys, she turned the corner round to the house, and I was left there, the maddest votary of the Goddess of Contradiction.

CHAPTER XIX

It was a wonderful night. The hay was stacked, the veriest stranger could have told you, in the corner of the field nearest the house ; the jessamine glowed faintly in the light of a half-hidden moon, and the wind that fanned it was heavy with the odour of mignonette and roses. The landrail had taken her brood out on the fallows, so that the windows lacked her stick-and-comb chatter, but there came to you the purr of nightjars and the long hoot of owls, white monsters that sailed and swooped ; or you looked out over the valley, and about you was the flap and squeak of bats, and the boom of beetles, and the whirr of moths, and all the million sounds and scents of a night in summer. And the Chief Butler slapped me on the shoulder as I leaned against the shutters, and asked if I intended doing anything particular that evening.

The days following my last interview with

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the Lady of the Lake had found me influenced by an unaccustomed longing for inactivity. True, I had made a sketch or so, well enough so far as colour went, for that was easily seen, and needed but a surface-trick or so to make what some might call a picture ; but they were open books, to be read running, made by a mechanician more than by any one else. And there had been the Sinner's garden-prize, and his whole-hearted joy at receiving the few shillings that make a boy of his likes happy. But it was a passive existence ; everything was centred in that word *to-morrow*, when I was to see again the shadows of the oaks in the lake, as I saw them three months ago,—no, but differently, for there had happened much since then.

I had occupation enough with my thoughts, perhaps ; but the Chief Butler meant something of an attention to me, and with as good a show of willingness as I could command I put myself at his service.

"I thought we might have a bit of a chat up in my room," said he, caring little for my bats and jessamine. "T'other chap's out, and there ain't much doing on a muggy night like this." I suppose I looked regretfully at the warm wet

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darkness beyond the window. He filled in his own picture. "I've a weed or so you might care to try, and a bottle of good whiskey ; at least I gave four bob for it, and it ought to be drinkable at that. What do you think ?"

I thought that the existence of the tobacco and spirits was sufficient reason for accepting his invitation. The Chief Butler buying four-shilling whiskey for other people, thought I, but I wondered what might be coming.

"Take a pew," said he, and shut the door. Something strange in his manner struck me, an unaccustomed joviality, a curious elation. He produced a cigar-case and proffered it ; I selected a biggish cigar with some misgivings. "You'll like those, I think ; at least, they ought to be good ; I gave—however, see what you think of them. Havannas are getting scarcer, they tell me."

"It's excellent, quite excellent," quoth I, reproaching myself for my misgivings.

"I thought they were pretty fair. Well" (he laid the case open at my elbow), "help yourself to another when you've finished that. And now for the whuskey."

Whuskey, thought I ; but the change of vowel suited his mood, you could see. "Don't you

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ever smoke?" I asked him as he produced a brand-new corkscrew.

"No, I don't; I used to, but gave it up." Whip came the cork, and he smelt it with an air. "I hope this is all right. You ought to get pretty decent stuff for four bob, oughtn't you?"

The question was asked off-hand, but he waited eagerly for the inevitable answer. There was obviously vast pleasure in anticipating a compliment; and I declare (for at one time I would not have believed it) that it was a pleasure just then to answer truthfully.

"Well, you mix it as you like," he went on. "There's soda here; you prefer that to water, I suppose?" I did not, but there were reasons for the falsehood. "And what's that like?" he asked. The question had been on the end of his tongue for three minutes, and he found employment in a pretended search for something; a book presumably, but he looked on the floor for it among other places.

"The whiskey is excellent too; in fact, as good as the cigar. Are you not going to try some?"

He looked doubtfully at the bottle. "Do you know, I think I will," he said, and filled a

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glass. Presently he sipped it, sat down and became contemplative. "You knew we break up to-morrow?" he said at last. I nodded. Indeed, had I not been thinking of it for a week past? He held his glass up to the light and gazed leisurely at it. "Heard anything about me?" he asked slowly.

"I don't think so."

"I've kept it pretty dark, purposely." There was a pause of a minute or so. "Fact is, I'm leaving this term."

I was meant to express great surprise, and did so. He seemed waiting for something more. "You will be very much missed," I ventured at last.

"Yes, I think I shall," he answered with decision; "I think I shall. The old man told me so, in fact."

"However, I suppose I may congratulate you?" His face showed that it was the right question.

"Congratulate me? On the whole, yes, I think I am to be congratulated,—not exactly on leaving this shop, you understand, but— Well, I've done what I set out to do—that's what it is. I think I'm to be congratulated on that."

"And that was?" I began interrogatively.

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He settled himself in his chair and crossed a long leg over his knee. I remember noticing that his boots were particularly good ones. He saw me glance at them, and on any other occasion would have told me the cost ; but this was not an ordinary occasion. "It's a long story," said he. "How's the cigar going ?"

"Admirably, and the whiskey ; and the longer the story the better." Truly, there was something different in the man. I could not have said that a week earlier.

The Chief Butler took up the cigar-case and handled it curiously. Then he pulled out a cigar and rolled it between tentative fingers. "Not very strong, are they ?" he asked.

"There's a pretty good flavour to them ; you couldn't call it mild tobacco."

"Oh," said he, and laid it down with something like a sigh, I thought. Presently he took it up again and examined the label. "You don't smoke cigarettes, do you ?" he asked at last.

"Caporal, if I can get them, I do ; Algerian, sometimes. I generally carry some kind of cigarette, though."

"May I look at them, if you've got any on you ?"

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"Why, of course," said I, and handed him my case. They were Americans ; I hate your Turkish and Egyptian stuff.

He regarded the open case with interest. "Do you know, I think I should rather like to try one of these," he said. And again, I would not have believed it possible that my answer could have given me so much pleasure.

He lay back in his chair, and blew the smoke gingerly at first, almost as a school-boy smokes. Presently he seemed more at home,—took hold of it, as it were. When I glanced at him the third time he was inhaling the smoke quietly, almost dreamily. "Odd," he said, "damned odd it is."

I am not squeamish with regard to the possibilities of the English language, but I had often before arrested myself in mid-speech in the Chief Butler's company, fearing to offend. Yet the expression did not startle me then, for this was not the Chief Butler, but more of a human being, as who should say.

"Odd?" I asked.

"How it brings it all back. Twenty years ago," he said slowly, "twenty—years—ago." And he blew a mighty cloud to the ceiling. "My father was a clergyman," he went on after

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a little. "He died just after I left college, died in debt." He flipped the ash off his cigarette, and for a time was silent. Then he spoke deliberately and in short sentences. "When a man of twenty-two with no relations finds that his sole possessions in the world are a mathematical degree and five pounds, there's only one course open to him. At least I figured it out pretty clearly, and it seemed so to me. Mind you, I wasn't a man of accomplishments. I couldn't turn my hand to scribbling for papers, or painting pictures. I couldn't act worth twopence a week, couldn't sing, not a note in tune. I knew that then, and I've often been sorry about it. No, there wasn't much choice, with only five pounds.

"It's so darned easy too. Just get a note or so from your tutors and call on an agent, and the thing's done. First shove off I got a post, not a bad one either, as posts go; forty pounds a term; I've had worse since.

"There were eight of us at that place—bigish school by the sea, it was; some of them were decent chaps and some were bounders. I wonder what's become of them all now. There was Swain,—thundering great bullock of a man he was too. I remember him carrying

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a fellow called Tomlin under his arm round the common-room, and spanking him, because Tomlin told him he couldn't sing; said he'd make Tomlin sing, and he did too, like one o'clock. And Taff, he was a funny devil; used to rot his arithmetic class; asked 'em if fourteen gooseberries grew on three bushes, how many cats there were in a beefsteak-pie. The Head came in one day and found him in full swing,—class gaping like so many cod-fish, and a picture of a meat-pie on the blackboard. He went that term. And Kippers, too, old Kippers,—he was a queer chap. That wasn't his name, you know; we called him Kippers because he was always cheap. Lord, Lord!

"I was only there two terms; but—I don't know, Kippers and I, we used to get down in the town and go the rounds. I was some use at billiards in those days, and so was he. When we'd finished the lot,—still, most of the bobbies knew us, if there'd been any row. Kippers used to turn up late for breakfast,—couldn't touch a thing; said he thought he could toy with a devilled sparrow's leg. The masters used to breakfast at the cottage, you know, not at the school. Then I'd come in, worse than Kippers. And there was Swain gulping down great

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shovelfuls of porridge, and Tomlin letting into the cold bacon like a good 'un. Of course, there'd have been a row if we hadn't turned up to breakfast at all, and as it was, Carver (he was a sort of head-usher, and a confounded prig at the price we thought him) used to sit up and snort a bit when we weighed in with hock and seltzer instead of tea. Still, he wasn't a bad sort after all, for he never said a word to the Head about us; and he might have made things deuced unpleasant. Taff, for instance,—Carver knew all about Taff and tried to have it out with him, said it wasn't playing the game to rot your arithmetic class when you were paid to teach 'em two and two, and so on; and some other things he said, too, because Taff didn't play football with the boys as we were supposed to do. Well, Taff got angry then; I think he was a bit ashamed of himself really, but he went on rotting his class to rile Carver, and hadn't been at it ten days before the Head nailed the whole show, pie and all. Taff couldn't get work after that. Carver lent him a fiver.

“Kippers was only there one term; he quarrelled with Calver before he went, like most of us. Carver got rather touchy because Kippers liked to play the piano when he came in at night,

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and he didn't always come in as early as he might have, either. Kippers said it wasn't Carver's or any one else's business how he spent his evenings ; and Carver said quite quietly he didn't care how Kippers spent his evenings, or where he spent them, or whether he spent them at all,—didn't care enough about him in fact—but he wasn't going to be waked up at two o'clock in the morning by a tipsy puppy trying to sit straight on a music-stool and playing the piano with his foot and a gin-bottle. That riled Kippers, because he could play, and it didn't matter if he was drunk or sober,—he seemed sort of at home with it, if you know what I mean—so he chucked the milk-jug at Carver and went out in a tearing rage, and wrote his resignation bang away. The Head wasn't sorry, I should fancy. Kippers ! I wonder now——

“Then there was Larson. He was a rum cove, always thinking about his health. I don't believe there was anything the matter with him, except that he ate too much. He said he wanted to build up his constitution or some such rot, so he used to swallow buckets of rice-pudding and prunes at lunch, because rice-pudding was starch and prunes were pills ; I forget exactly how he

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put it. Then he was fearfully particular about tea and tannin and stewed leaves, and wouldn't drink the stuff unless he'd seen it made, so to speak. In the evening he'd swill great cups of cocoa and go to bed holding his stomach with both hands, and hoping he'd feel a bit more built up the next morning. Then at breakfast Swain would whisper to Tomlin that Larson was looking terribly pulled down, poor devil, and Larson would cheer up like anything and go for the porridge all over again. And what an appetite he had. That rice——

“Of course, Carver and Swain and Tomlin, they were all right. Carver's got a school of his own now, and Swain's a parson; his people gave him a living, I think. Tomlin came in for some money. They were all right—steady, I mean, and so on. But the rest of us,—bar Larson, and he was always thinking about his digestion——”

The Chief Butler stopped, looked at me, and astonished me with this apparently irrelevant question. “Ever done anything with a revolver, potting at a bottle, I mean,—anything of that sort? Well, I dare say you know it isn't as easy as it looks. The thing seems as if it must be built crooked, and you get humbugging with

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the mechanism of it—looking down the barrel and so on, and then the jury——

“Eh? Oh, well, it was this way. There was a school near us we used to play at football, and we got to know the masters there through meeting them down in the town, and at the club. There was a chap there named Mellish who was rather older than the rest of us; in fact, he was some way over fifty, though we didn’t think he was so much just then, for he used to humbug about with us a good bit, and sometimes you’d hardly have thought he was much older than we were, unless you caught him in a bad light, or when he wasn’t remembering. Once at the club he saw me staring at him when he looked like that, and I suppose he knew what I was thinking, for he gave a little jump and a smile and spanked Carver, who was trying a nastyish losing hazard. Carver swore because he missed it, but when he saw who it was he just laughed and said it was after he’d made the shot and it didn’t baulk him. I think he knew Mellish was feeling pretty bad: we just thought he was an ass.

“Mellish seemed to cotton to me more than to the others; we used to go out walks together, and that was how it all came about. Mellish,

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you see, knew one or two of the farmers round the place, and he got one of them to let him put up a revolver-range in a field there was, and he and I used to pot about there, bottles, you know, and sardine-tins and apples ; an apple don't look very big at twenty yards. I couldn't hit the things. We used to put up six in a row on laths at different heights and then walk up to them from catch distances, firing as quickly as you could,—same as if men were running at you—because Mellish used to talk about going to California, and said it would come in useful. He brought an old coat one day, and amused himself firing through the side-pockets ; it was rummy to see him. Then another day Carver came, and I thought he looked a bit queerly at Mellish now and again, but he never said anything at the time. Well, one Saturday Mellish asked me to go with him to this farmer's, and on the way he got talking about his prospects and so on, said he was an old man and he'd never get another post, and that he didn't know what he should do, because he hadn't any money or any people to go to ; he was only fit to teach quadratics and irregular verbs, and couldn't take to another business at his time of life. I asked him what he was driving at, and then it came

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out he'd had notice to go ; at least, he'd been advised to resign, as the Head wanted a younger man for his work. Well, it seemed he'd tried mining-shares to get a bit of capital together to start again, and the mine had gone wrong. He asked what he'd better do. He was beastly melancholy ; I'd never seen him like it before, and I said people had been in worse holes than that before,—I don't know what I said. However, before we came to the farmer's field he cheered up wonderfully, and laughed at me for missing a great tin kettle we put up to shoot at, till I thought he'd never stop. He knocked the spout off the thing himself, and laughed at that too. Then we stuck up the laths and the apples, and I had my six shots and got two of them, and jolly proud I was, for I'd never got more than one before and not often that. Well, I put up the apples for Mellish, and he went and blazed away at them. When he stopped he hadn't hit one,—he was a first-class shot—and he seemed puzzled by the set of his face. I saw him looking pretty hard at the revolver, and he said something about its being foul ; he was squinting down the barrel when he spoke. It never occurred to me to stop him, for I thought he'd fired all six. Well, there was a

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bang and he dropped ; that's all I ever knew about it. The bullet went in at his cheek——

“You've seen dead men before? Well, I hadn't. I didn't think he was dead, because he seemed looking at something,—something miles and miles away it was—staring and staring. Of course, I got the farmer's wife,—said there'd been an accident. She called some of the men, and between us we carried him in. But his eyes—they got set I suppose.

“Have you ever been in a real thundering funk? If you had asked me that once, I shouldn't have known what you meant. It was that face ; it used to come round me and stare at me ; it wasn't so bad in the daytime, though it would come then, sometimes ; but at night—God ! I had to go up-stairs in the dark to get to bed, and all the way it kept jiggling in front of me, going a little way back and then coming at me again, right into my face,—white it was, and the eyes staring and the jaw dropped. Have you ever noticed what it looks like when the jaw of a man drops as far as it will go? And when I got to my room I couldn't find the matches. It took me ages to find them, and all the while I was saying, ‘That terrible face, that terrible face,’ over and over again, though

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I didn't know it till there was a light. I tell you, for days I saw that thing. I dreaded being alone. I used to invent all sorts of excuses for being with people. Once in broad daylight it came ; it was on a horribly tall body, and it came and stooped over my shoulder and looked at me upside down. That was a week afterwards. I hoped it would have gone, you know. I got drunk that night,—it took a long while—and I put out the light. After that it didn't come again.

“I left the school that term, and went for another place. You see, I wanted to save. I've been saving ever since, steadily. It has changed me, I know ; because one has to give up a lot of things, whiskey, for instance, and tobacco. I couldn't make up my mind about tobacco for a long time ; but I'm glad I did—I'm glad I did. And shaving too,—I grew a beard once, but it wouldn't have paid, because it made me look older. That shows you what little things I've thought about.

“But it has changed me. For one thing, I've found it awfully hard to think about anything else ; and the younger men have always laughed at me when I've begun gassing about it. That's only natural, I suppose, but it's their

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game to save, you know ; it's their game, and they none of them do it.

"Of course, it has been hard work. I've been very thorough about it, very thorough, calculating things beforehand, you know. Here, I'll show you something."

The Chief Butler arose, went to a drawer, unlocked it and produced—the black leather book.

"I'm not going to bore you with all of it," he said. "Let me see ; yes, July 31st." And he pointed to an item which read : *cigars 4s. 6d. —whiskey 4s.—two siphons soda-water 9d.—9s. 3d.* "I calculated that a fortnight ago," he said. "I knew you wouldn't be out to-night, because of your packing." He looked at the figures pensively. "It may seem a lot," he said, "for one evening,—nine-and-threepence—but I meant to spend it, and I think I'm justified. I've done what I set out to do."

"And that was, exactly?"

"To save a certain sum of money. A thousand pounds, in fact. I've saved that, and a little over."

"You are a very wonderful man," I said.

"In some ways I think I am," he replied ; "yes, in some ways—one way, at all events."

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He picked up the book. "I've had this for twenty years now," he said, "and during those twenty years I've never made a real miscalculation. Everything has cost what I thought it would ; I've always been able to ink in my figures, so to speak. Everything I've set out to do I've done,—in the first part of the book."

"The first part ?"

"It's divided into two parts, you see. Part one, while I'm still an assistant-master, and part two, when I've got a school of my own. The lease of that school-house, for instance ; I made it out worth so much, and I got it for that much, after a bit. Yes, I've always done what I set out to do in the first part,—all except one thing I haven't been able to try yet."

"What is that ?" I asked.

He hesitated. "I meant to tell you. Somehow,—I think I'll wait till to-morrow," he said at last. "If it comes off all right, I'll ask you to drink my health."

"Good heavens," said I, "I forgot ;" and I raised my glass, but he stopped me. "No, wait till to-morrow." He strode across to a cupboard and opened the door. "See there," he said ; there was a bottle of champagne.

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"Wait till to-morrow," he repeated, and he bade me good-night.

I went to my room and leaned out over the sill. The moon was high, and there was little doing between me and the sky,—indigo powdered with a dust of brilliants. Down wind and up the house-wall came the scent of mignonette and the warm breath of hay and meadow-sweet from the sloping field, and I drew in large draughts of it, and let my thoughts run riot back through the three summer months I had spent in that happy countryside. I thought of the first evening I had sat under my laburnum-tree and looked out over the valley; of the guileless pair of urchins who had installed themselves as my companions from the outset; of the wonderful nights when the nightingales called up the valley to me to come and see what secrets the primroses and bluebells by the lake-side could tell me; of the strange story of the Other Man, and then of the quaint history I had heard that evening. And I fell to guessing at what might be the one thing in the first part that the Chief Butler had reserved until to-morrow. But that word *to-morrow* set me thinking of what the morning held in store for me also, and over that I fell asleep.

CHAPTER XX

LITTLE did I dream (of all things !) who was to precede me to the lake ; nor much of that bottle of champagne, though that had stirred my curiosity not a little. But at ten o'clock the next morning, looking out of my window, I beheld the Chief Butler, top-hatted and grave as of yore, setting out—lake-wards ! And I watched him till he disappeared in the trees.

If I was astonished at this at the moment, and if I began to wonder at his reason, and had almost decided that he had deferred until to-day the farewell necessary to be taken from so near a neighbour, I was saved from further speculation by the appearance on the scene of the Sinner. He and the Problem also had witnessed the Chief Butler's departure.

"Did you see?" said the Sinner. "Isn't it a nuisance? He's going down to see my cousin's gardener ; on business, he said ; I heard him say so at breakfast."

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"Is that so, Sinner? But why is it a nuisance?"

"Because we've got to go and get him a cab. You see, we're the only two left, because all the boys go away early on the last day; and it takes ever so long to get cabs."

"I'm very sorry, Sinner. But isn't the inn where you get cabs on the way to the lake?" The Sinner confessed that it was. "Then why not order the cab on the way?"

"But—but I thought you were coming with us down to the lake. And then, if we came back here, it would take——"

"I see. Then I'm the nuisance really, it seems?"

"I didn't mean that," said the Sinner doubtfully.

The obvious solution of the difficulty was for me to finish my packing and to follow the boys alone, a course of action which appeared to commend itself to them, and the last I saw of them was a wave from the Sinner's hat; he was shouting at me from the corner to be quick with my packing.

Before I had finished that, the Chief Butler returned. He walked slowly, whipping at the poppy-heads with his stick. When he neared

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my window he looked up, caught my eye, and looked down again. He entered the house. Presently a cab drove past, bound for the school. The Chief Butler hailed it from the doorstep ; there ensued a short altercation (I imagined a lapse in the Sinner's memory) and the Chief Butler's hand went to his pocket. Presently there was a little procession of lackeys and servant-maids bearing portmanteaux and boxes. The procession took ten minutes or so, and I watched it from my window. There was a final search for possible oversights, and the coachman climbed upon his box. It occurred to me to go down, and then I remembered that the Chief Butler had seen me at my window. I hesitated, and the cab drove away.

I turned to my packing. When I thought about it, things came clearer. I thought of all the Chief Butler had said to me the evening before ; especially, of course, of his reference to the one thing in the first part of the book which, unlike the rest, he was unable to ink in, as he put it. I called to mind his hesitant answers to my questions when first I inquired of him concerning the inmates of the red-brick house in the valley ; his meditative acquiescence when I had asked him if he would not need

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a wife to help him keep his school-in-the-air going ; his self-assurance with regard to his calculations for the future. There was no doubt about it ; he had asked the Lady of the Lake—no, but it was absurd ! Why, he did not speak to her once a month ! He had been twelve years at the school ; she must have been a baby of—but it was absurd !

Yet was it not possible that the man, accustomed for twenty years to regard the future as something to be mapped out exactly, forecast with precision and inevitably *inked in*, had somehow built his wish into his accounts,—had dated in his acceptance hardly so much as a future possibility, rather as a future fact ? I could think of no other conclusion ; and then,—the bottle of champagne.

That set me on another train of thought, for the Chief Butler had not said good-bye to me ; not a word of farewell in any shape or form. Perhaps the cab,—perhaps he was taking away his goods in instalments. I went down to his room ; it looked bare enough, but then, there was never over-much furniture to boast of. The cupboard was empty ; he had taken away what was there last night, and there were no healths to be drunk after all. There was not

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a doubt about anything ; and as if to clinch matters, before I finished my packing, his cab (you could not mistake the sorry fleabitten white) came rattling back through the gates as I idly stared out over the valley.

That reminded me of the time. Doubtless the Sinner and the Problem were even now playing havoc with the trout and the butterflies ; and I set off down the hill, and I know—though I felt a strange hesitancy in going—that there was but one thought worth thinking then. Had not to-morrow come ?

The sun was on the woods, and the sun was on the water just as it had been that day when first I saw the Lady of the Lake among her swans. And there lay the Problem among the bracken, reading, just as he lay among the primroses on the day when I drew my picture of the Sinner ; and the Sinner was over knees in the brook, rejoicing with a net and wet knickerbockers. And the Lady of the Lake herself stood on the bank of the stream and turned to meet me as I came.

“ We are here, as you see, all three of us. We look happy enough, don't we ? ” She picked up a pebble and dropped it neatly in front of the Sinner, who paused to greet me

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cheerfully. "Look at that child! Is there a happier mortal in the world at this moment, do you suppose?"

"Oh, I nearly got it," cried the Sinner, and saved himself from perils of deep waters by an overhanging bough.

"And the other, too,—but he is a quaint little person. He came down here this morning, and almost the first words he said to me were to beg me never to leave him,—never to go away, I think he put it."

"And you said?"

"Oh, I told him that I should be here always, and that he should come whenever he liked, and that he was a good boy, and lots of other things. Then I made him a nosegay, and he is as happy as the day is long. Aren't you?" she called. The Problem looked up questioningly. "You're quite happy, aren't you?" she repeated.

The Problem said "Yes, thank you" (he was ever of a polite habit), and returned contentedly to his book.

Just then the Sinner uttered a cry of joy, splashed out of the brook and stood exultant before us. "I've got one,—a real one, isn't it?—a trout."

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It was a very small speckled being, and it flapped in a disheartened way at the bottom of the net.

"It is indeed. But, my dear Sinner, look—you're standing on your stockings. Run and put the trout in the can."

The Sinner, after a doubtful glance at wet footprints on a black stocking, repaired to the edge of the brook, and searched among the reeds. Then he brought his capture to us, restored to its natural element.

"Why, Sinner, that's my paint-water bottle. Where did you get it?"

"Oh, is it yours? I found it by the lake. I thought it was like yours, but then I didn't think you would have forgotten it." So I had left it by the lake, when that miserable portrait—but I was resolved to think no more of that. The Sinner regarded it wistfully. "Shall I put it away?" he asked.

"No, Sinner, no; you may have it, all for your very own."

"Oh, thank you," said the Sinner. "I think it likes it, you know," he added, examining his prisoner with attention.

"That reminds me," said the Lady of the

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Lake ; "I picked up what I think is one of your brushes." She produced from her pocket my wash-brush. My paint-water bottle, then, was not all I had forgotten. "What in the world is a brush of that size used for?" she went on.

"The work I am most fond of. Skies chiefly,—heaven, if you're poetical."

"Wouldn't it do for washing out rather well? Washing out something you didn't like, for instance?"

"It was not last used for that," I answered, looking into her eyes. I thought she dropped them for the fraction of a second. I declare I had forgotten the boys altogether.

"It must have done a lot of work in its time," she observed, looking at it critically, and then back at myself.

"If I were to tell you all the work that brush has done, I should be telling you a long story. And part of it—supposing of course that it concerned any one who was of the slightest importance to yourself, which I have every reason to believe is not the case—part of it might be considered interesting. You might even find it amusing."

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The Sinner was listening in rapt silence. "Oh, do tell us," he said ; and I am sure the Lady of the Lake started at his voice.

"You see, Sinner," said I, "this brush belonged to a very old friend of mine." I took it from her hand as I spoke. "And once he painted a very wonderful picture ; indeed, I believe he hardly knew himself how he had painted the picture, it was so wonderful. And some one—he never could tell why—hated this picture, and took this brush and daubed it all over until you couldn't tell there had ever been a picture at all."

"And what did he do ?" questioned the Sinner with breathless interest.

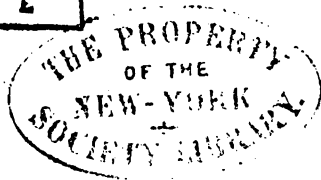
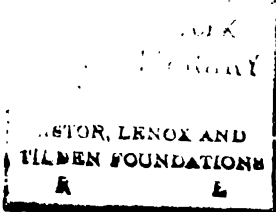
"What did he do, Sinner ? Really, I hardly know ; in fact I'm not sure that he did anything particular. I think he was so dumfounded by the fact that the picture he had painted was gone,—for he loved it, you see, all the time he was painting it—that for a little time he went mad." I heard the Lady of the Lake catch her breath. "And then he recovered ; but he knew he could never be the same afterwards, because he had lost this picture ; unless, of course—unless——"

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"Unless what?" asked the Sinner.

But at that moment a black and white butterfly floated lazily over the bracken to a thorn-bush. The Sinner forgot my story; and I was left with the Lady of the Lake, who stood facing me.

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